

THE RETENTION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: WHAT  
ENCOURAGES THEM TO STAY IN COLLEGE?

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the retention rate of college students with disabilities and the factors that encourage this population of students to successfully persist to graduation. The study explored the current lack of information in regard to the comparison of the retention rates of college students with disabilities to that of the general college population and the population of other minority college students. Through this qualitative study, disability-service offices at medium-sized, and four-year public universities in the southeast region of the United States were explored. Directors of these offices and students with invisible and apparent disabilities were interviewed. This study has determined that there are several factors that influence the retention of college students with disabilities. These factors range from the individual resiliency of students to the philosophy of service delivery adopted by directors in disability-service offices. The information gathered through this study is limited due to the size of the sample, but the gained information can be used as a starting point for further research.

## DEDICATION

The path through this learning process has been something that has both challenged me as a learner and encouraged me as a practitioner. It is through the unwavering support of my family that I was able to accomplish this task.

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# **CHAPTER I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Background**

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the study of the retention rates of students in post-secondary institutions. The primary interest among secondary educators and postsecondary educators has been in the number of students transitioning to universities from high school (Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). There has been little research done on what would keep students in school, and even less research in tracking the graduation rates of college students with disabilities (Moxley, Najor-Durak, & Dumbrique, 2004). For the past 100 years, the national retention rate for college students in four-year public universities has remained stagnant at around the 50% mark (Tinto, 2003). Although the numbers of students with disabilities attending college has increased (National Council on Disabilities, 2000; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009), this population still enrolls in college at a rate that is 50% lower than their peers without disabilities (Stodden & Dowrick, 2000). While the numbers of students with disabilities enrolling in college is lower than their typical peers, it is not due to disinterest in a college degree. In fact, 80% of students with disabilities have an ambition of receiving a post-secondary education (Newman et al., 2009). Of the students with disabilities that enroll in college, the average retention rate is only 12% (National Organization on Disabilities, 2000). To ensure that college students with disabilities have an equal opportunity at academic success, it is important to understand the specific needs of this population.

The passing of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL93-112) was accomplished primarily to make both the job markets and postsecondary institutions of learning more accessible to people with disabilities. Since the passing of this law, and subsequently the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), the number of students with disabilities attending universities has increased dramatically (Reid & Knight, 2006). The percentage of enrolled college students with disabilities, in the percentage of first generation, full-time students has more than tripled from 2.6% in 1978 to 9.2% in 1994 (Henderson, 1999; Leahman, Davies & Laurin, 2000; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999). Yet another report shows that nearly 17% of all postsecondary students report having a disability (National Council on Disability, 2000).

Since the passing of the indicated federal laws, the amount of research focusing on students with disabilities has greatly increased. Research in this area typically focuses on one of three primary areas: university compliance, difficulties with specific populations, and satisfaction with services. While many administrators in higher education focus on the transition of students with disabilities from high school into college, many naturally prepare those students for enrollment in two-year colleges instead of four-year universities (Horn & Berk told, 1999). An understanding of the individualized needs of students with disabilities and the necessary academic accommodations will help students with disabilities move towards a successful completion of coursework in four-year universities (Shaw & Scott, 2003). Such an understanding will also assist school officials to become more prepared for the needs of students with disabilities in their pursuit for success in higher education.

## Problem Statement

The established retention rate for college students has hovered at the 50th percent for the last 100 years, with relatively little growth (Seidman, 2005). This identified retention rate of the general college population, however, does not paint a clear picture of the retention rate of the marginalized population of students with disabilities. Students from marginalized populations earn college degrees at a ratio of 1:3 (Tinto, 2003). This implies that for every three traditional college students that graduate from college, two students from an underrepresented group have dropped out of college. College students with disabilities typically have lower retention rates, take longer to complete their degrees, and have a lower degree completion rates than their peers without disabilities (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000; Wessel, Jones, Markle, & Westfall, 2009).

Marginalized populations in general can be described as groups of people who share identity traits outside what is considered the norm. Among conversations regarding marginalized populations in a university setting, the population of students with disabilities is often excluded. Because there is little known about the retention rates of students with disabilities, further research needs to be done to establish the difference in retention rates of students with disabilities compared to the student population as a whole. In addition, research needs to be done to establish the services that might best support this sub-population and help move the retention rate closer to the overall parity with the college-age population.

## Significance of the Study

This study has built on the established field of research regarding the retention of college students. Because the retention of college students with disabilities has not been studied to any

great extent, this research has contributed to the understanding of this population as a whole. Evidence has reasonably identified the most used and beneficial accommodations provided by disability-service providers and the key factors that retain college students with disabilities. Historically, the study of retention rates in college students has been the job of certain specialists on college campuses. According to Berger and Lyon (2005) the study, and management, of college student retention has become the “responsibility of all educators on campus, faculty and staff, even when there are specialized staff members solely dedicated to improving retention (p. 4).” Knowing that the responsibility is now shared, it is also the responsibility for more college professionals to have an understanding of how to assist college students with disabilities. Information gathered through this study has helped provide introductory information to guide professionals in this responsibility of improving retention for college students with disabilities.

## Research Questions

A review of the literature regarding the history of retention in higher education has identified five major themes that make up models of college student retention. These five themes include economic model, organizational model, psychological model, sociological model, and interactional model. These models will be discussed further in the literature review, but serve as a basis for outlining the research questions for this study.

Research Question 1: What factors contribute to the retention of college students with disabilities?

Research Question 2: Which services provided by disability-services offices are considered most valuable by the students who receive the services?

## Research Design

This study used an exploratory research design (Monroe College, 2011) to develop insights into what encourages students with disabilities to stay in college through graduation. This study gathers data from several sources consisting of site visits, demographic information, and semi-structured interviews. By using a combination of information, the researcher was able to use the case-study strategy to gain insight from participants in an authentic context. In addition, conversations from professionals in the field of disability in higher education contributed to the data.

## Definitions of Terms

For the purpose of this study, several terms have been presented that may not currently be known to people outside the higher education environment. Those terms and definitions follow.

1. *Academic Accommodation*: An alternative way of presenting academic material or services that is not originally accessible to a student with a disability (Gordon & Keiser, 1998).
2. *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD)*: A qualifying disability that is defined by the marked difficulty in maintaining attention (Kolberg & Nadeau, 2002).
3. *Attrition*: This refers to students who fail to re-enroll at an institution in consecutive semesters (Tinto, 1993).
4. *Learning disability*: A heterogeneous group of disabilities that represent a difficulty in the acquisition of listening, process, speaking, reading, writing or mathematical skills (Gordon & Keiser, 1998).
5. *Marginalized population*: A generally underrepresented group of people who are not fully included in the social, cultural, economic, or political life (Cook, 2008).

6. *Matriculation*: Continual enrollment and registration for courses moving toward graduation (American Council on Education, 2005).
7. *Physical disability*: A heterogeneous group of disabilities that significantly impact multiple body organs and systems. These could include neurological, musculoskeletal, visual, auditory or chronic medical disabilities (Gordon & Keiser, 1998).
8. *Psychological disability*: A group of disabilities in which the person exhibits abnormal thoughts or behaviors that significantly affect the ability to maintain one or more life function (Gordon & Keiser, 1998).
9. *Retention*: The ability of an institution to retain a student from admission to the university through graduation (American Council on Education, 2005) .
10. *Students with disabilities*: Persons who (a) have a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person's major, life activities, (b) have a record of such an impairment, or (c) are regarded as having such an impairment (Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

## Theoretical Framework

With the attrition rate remaining high over many years, there has been extensive research done to identify the conditions that promote persistence toward graduation (Seidman, 2005). These conditions were the topic of a presentation by Vincent Tinto (2003) and the basis for his frequently studied theory of student retention. These five conditions have been presented as the staples of success for all college students.

These five areas contributed to the development of Tinto's Theory of Integration (2001). The five conditions are expectations, support, feedback, involvement, and learning. They are defined as follows:

1. Expectations: Environments that have high expectations for their students will see a higher graduation rate. Students typically will not rise to low expectations. Fleming (1984) stated that students, who have historically been excluded from higher education, are deeply affected by the perceived expectations of the campus climate and the perceptions of the expectations that faculty and staff hold for individual academic performance.

2. Support: Students are more likely to succeed in environments that offer support for their academic, personal, social, emotional and spiritual needs (Tinto, 2003). Some forms of support are formal in nature such as summer bridge programs, or mentoring programs. Others may not be as structured, such as student contact with faculty and staff advisors. Whatever form of support that is needed, it is imperative that colleges provide this support at many levels.

3. Feedback: Students have been given immediate feedback their entire lives. Through elementary, middle and high school, students knew how they were achieving at any given time. It is the responsibility of colleges and universities to provide that feedback so they can persist toward graduation (Tinto, 2005). Students will then have the opportunity to respond appropriately and make changes when needed.

4. Involvement: A feeling of belonging and involvement in an educational setting will allow students to invest in their learning environment. If students are viewed as valued members of the institution, they are more likely to continue toward graduation (Tinto, 2001).

5. Learning: Finally, and most importantly, students will maintain their commitment to college if they are in an environment that truly fosters learning (Tinto, 2001). A student who is



an effective learner is often more likely to stay in the educational environment. It is the responsibility of the university to provide opportunities for those students outside the general classroom to enhance their learning.

The conditions stated previously are those needed for the retention of all students. Students with disabilities have many additional needs. Aside from the typical conditions of being a college student, students with disabilities are also concerned with accessibility (physical, programmatic and attitudinal), support services, faculty and administrative acceptance, and acceptance into the university culture (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005; Gordon & Keiser, 1998). While these additional concerns appear to be deterrents on the surface, to adequately meet these needs, students with disabilities often create their own support systems at universities. The people that make up these support systems typically know how to navigate the paths of college life and can provide many useful answers to the questions most college students have to learn on their own.

## Methodological Overview

This exploratory case study made use of qualitative data from interviews; rich, descriptive information from campus visits; and interview data from interviews with disability-service directors to gain an understanding of what keeps college students with disabilities in school. An included literature review of the history of disabilities will help readers understand the disability-rights movement. In addition, the literature review also includes the impact of legislation on disability rights, the general retention theories in higher education, and studies regarding the retention of college students with disabilities.

This project is a study of the retention of college students with disabilities attending large, public, four-year universities in the southeastern United States. For the purpose of this study, large universities are defined as universities with a total student population over 10,000 students who receive federal funding within the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama.

### Methodological Assumptions

For the purpose of this study, it is plausible to assume that the information regarding the retention rate for the general student population is accurate and generated annually. Because retention rates are areas of general knowledge in the majority of public universities, it is safe to assume that the individuals selected to set up interviews and contribute factual information will have the necessary background knowledge to provide accurate information. It is also safe to assume that any director of disability-services offices completing this questionnaire will be able to identify “registered students with disabilities.”

### Delimitations

This study is focused on the group of students with disabilities who attend public four-year universities in the Southeast region of the United States. This group is the primary focus due to the specific set of needs naturally occurring in four-year, public universities. The academic and social needs are very different in a four-year university than a two-year college (Rab, 2006). Among the most observable differences is the need to navigate the residential component of the university. In addition, class sizes, content, and professor course loads vary significantly between four-year universities and two-year colleges.

In order to complete this study through interviews, the universities to be studied were identified within states from the southeast region of the United States. This has allowed the researcher to visit the universities and conduct the interviews personally. During these visits, the researcher was able to observe the disability offices at each university to contribute to the rich, qualitative information needed for this study.

To better focus the comparisons of the students in each university, the total student enrollment for the universities was between 10,000 and 20,000 students. While large universities are defined by the Carnegie Classification System (The Carnegie Foundation, 2009) as any university with a total student population over 10,000 students, narrowing the size of the general population of the schools to those at the lower end of that range helped avoid the impact of any other factors that might have developed in larger-or-smaller sized universities (ratio of service provider to student, impact of potentially larger budgets, available resources, programming and outreach) .

## Limitations

Disclosure of disabilities is a voluntary act and is often highly restricted information. Getting an accurate number of students with disabilities at any given university is impossible. Many students do not disclose their disability to the disability-services office; however, the most accurate number of students with disabilities at the college is monitored through this office.

Universities do not frequently track the retention rates of students with disabilities, so this information is often difficult to attain. The director of the disability-services office would normally have the most-recent retention rate of the students with disabilities at the identified university. This number is based on the past year's student count. For the purpose of this study,

because disability service providers must accurately track the number of students and accommodation requests to complete annual reports, it is a safe assumption that the number of qualified students and any existing retention numbers reported by the disability-service directors were as close to accurate as possible.

## Organization of this Document

This chapter introduced the research study which is an exploratory case-study designed to investigate the potential reasons why students with disabilities choose to stay in college through graduation. Guiding questions were proposed to help the development of this project. These questions directed the development of the interview protocols that explored the retention of upper class students with disabilities in four-year public universities in the southeast United States.

Chapter II reviews the literature and how it relates to the topic of the retention of college students with disabilities in higher education. The exploration of the literature follows a distinct pattern focusing on the history of disabilities in the United States, followed by a presentation of disability legislation in the United States. The focus then shifts to the history of retention studies in higher education, which naturally leads to the study of the retention of students with disabilities in higher education. Chapter III describes the qualitative exploratory case-study research design. Data sources, gathering and analysis procedures are presented. Chapter IV describes the research findings, while Chapter V discusses the conclusions and recommendations for practice and provides suggestions for further research. Chapter V also concludes the project, giving a summary and focus for future program development.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Most careers in today's job market require a college degree for even entry-level positions (Rosenbaum, 2004). Six out of every ten jobs require at least some postsecondary education training (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003). Heckner (2004) predicted that by 2012, the number of jobs requiring advanced skills would grow at twice the rate of those requiring basic skills. Earning a high school diploma is no longer adequate in the developing knowledge-based economy (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 have made it possible for students with disabilities to pursue college degrees that were previously unattainable. Henderson (1999) estimated that approximately 9% of college students have qualifying disabilities. This statistic was up from the previously estimated 7% (Bowe, 1987). According to the 2010 Disability Status Report (Erickson, et. al, 2012) the national average for college aged people with disabilities was nearly 11%.

#### **Disability History**

Throughout history, people with disabilities have been given subhuman status in the world's social order (Albrecht, Seelman, & Bury, 2001). As far back as ancient times, people with disabilities were typically seen as immoral. In those times, abnormalities classified as disabilities were believed to be caused by the gods out of anger for sinful acts (Stiker, 2000).

This belief caused this group of people to be feared by the general society (Braddock & Parish, 2001).

During the middle ages, people with disabilities were viewed as either evil and demonic (Winzer, 1997) or were believed to be possessed by the divine spirit (DePoy & Gilson, 2004). In the societies that viewed disabilities as evil, those citizens who had disabilities were persecuted and burned as witches (Stiker, 2000). Following the Middle Ages, in the time periods known as the enlightenment, advances in the understanding of the anatomy of the human body contributed to the recognition that disabilities could be explained by functions of the physical world instead of the supernatural world (Stiker, 2000). However, the distinction between disabilities from birth and acquired disabilities prevailed throughout this time period. A baby born with a disability was often viewed as a “monstrosity” (DePoy & Gilson, 2004, p. 15).

During the Industrial Era, the legitimacy of people in society was based on the capability to work and earn money (Longmore & Umansky, 2001). People with disabilities who were unable to work were viewed as morally reprehensible and were incarcerated in the poorhouses (Depoy & Gilson, 2004). These poorhouses soon became what we know as mental institutions that housed people with disabilities for the remainder of their lives. This view changed drastically in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The notion that people with disabilities were morally reprehensible shifted to viewing this population as being medically broken. During this time period, people with permanently diagnosed disabilities were considered to have a legitimate disability that could be treated and fixed by the medical field (Linton, 1998). This allowed the idea of disabilities to be defined as primarily medical anomalies. This positioned medical professionals to be the guardians and gatekeepers over the lives of people with disabilities (Gleeson, 1997).

The view of disabilities as medical abnormalities persisted into the early 1970's (Barnartt & Altman, 2001). During this time, people with disabilities were seen as broken and needing to be fixed by medical professionals. The medical model placed sole blame for the disability on the person alone. In the early 1970's, a new disability model emerged known as the social model of disabilities. Within this new and powerful model, the blame for the disability was removed from the individual and placed on society. The distinction between a biological impairment and social disability became clear. The blame was placed solely on the barriers created in society by people without disabilities (Shakespeare & Watson, 1997). According to this model, regardless of the biological impairment, a person will only be as disabled as the barriers in society make them. Perhaps it was this model of disability that jumpstarted the disability rights movement we know today.

#### Disability Legislation in Higher Education

For more than 40 years, politicians and policymakers have been working to develop solid legislation to make our country more accessible for people with disabilities. This legislation began with the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968 (PL 90-480, 1968). This act required the removal of any architectural barriers in buildings that were linked in any way to federal funds (PL 90-480, 1968). This act was built upon by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112, 1973). This was the piece of legislation that first addressed the right of people with disabilities to attend college.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act states specifically that, “no otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 7(20), shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or

be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (PL 93-112). This section requires postsecondary institutions that receive federal funding to provide an equal educational experience for all students with disabilities who are considered otherwise qualified to attend the university. Out of the Rehabilitation Act grew the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (PL 101-336, 1990). The ADA was enacted to address the loopholes created in other disability antidiscrimination laws. This piece of legislation prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, transportation, public facilities, communication, and public accommodations (PL 101-336). The ADA now applies to all universities whether they receive federal financial assistance or if they are private. The ADA provides a legal protection for students with disabilities if their civil rights have been violated due to disability discrimination (Jetersen, 2001).

The ADA has recently been amended to broaden the definition of disability to the maximum extent possible and to alleviate the need for extensive evaluations (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2009). In addition, the amendments disallow the consideration of mitigating circumstances in the evaluation of disabilities. For example, a person cannot be disqualified as having attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder (ADHD) simply because he or she is on medication. Finally, the amendments recognize disabilities that are either in remission or are considered episodic if during active times, the disability would have a substantial impact on a major life activity. The ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA) was passed on September 25, 2008 and was enacted on January 1, 2009. These changes are moving toward the initial purpose of the law which was much like the Civil Rights Act of 1965, to “guarantee rights to those of our citizens who are too often denied them” (Gordon & Keiser, 1998, p. xv).



Although postsecondary institutions are moving in the direction of equal access for all students, there is still a lot of flexibility in how the ADA is interpreted. While the flexibility is purposeful and the law was written to be as encompassing as possible, this flexibility does not ensure that students with disabilities in higher education will have the same educational opportunities as their peers without disabilities. The differences in the interpretations of the ADA makes developing a minimum standard for accommodations and services in higher education very difficult (Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zelenik, & Whelley, 2005).

These significant pieces of civil rights legislation have had a positive impact on the number of people with disabilities who attend college. Aside from federal legislation mandating equal access, Perry and Franklin (2006) suggest the following five reasons for this increase in participation in higher education by students with disabilities: (1) self help and advocacy groups are placing increasing public pressure on public universities to accept and accommodate students with disabilities (2) universities are beginning to search for nontraditional students as a result of general enrollment decreases (3) there is an overall growing public knowledge of the social missions of public universities (4) increased levels of parental understanding and support, and (5) advancements in medicine and rehabilitation have made academic opportunities in four-year universities a possibility for people with disabilities.

### History of Retention in Higher Education

Interest in student success and retention in particular, has grown tremendously over the past decade. There has been such growth in interest in this area that an entire business field has grown from it. Retention firms, retention products, and retention consultants all seem to have the latest answer to the retention problem (Tinto, 2006). Students are beginning to examine the

retention rates of colleges as they make their final decisions. This information leads to potentially growing admission rates for colleges that are retaining students. State and federal funding sources are beginning to increase funding for public universities that show growing retention rates, and retention rates are being highlighted in the re-authorization of the federal Higher Education Act (Hossler, 2005). Although retention efforts are in focus at many postsecondary institutions, the actual retention rates have remained static (Barefoot, 2004; Tinto, 2003). While admitting more students to college is important, helping them complete their degree requirements in a timely manner is vital (Education Commission of the States, 2004).

College student retention has been the most widely studied area of higher education for the past thirty years (Braxton, 2000). Within this area of study, many theories of college retention have emerged. Throughout history, theories have been based on the economic benefit (Becker, 1964), the organizational perspective (Bean, 1980, 1982; Price & Mueller, 1981), the psychological processes (Astin, 1984; Bentler & Speckart, 1979, Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), the sociological perspective (Rootman, 1972), and perhaps the most widely cited theory, the interactionalist perspective (Tinto, 1975).

Each of these focus areas and the theories within represents a widespread need to understand what makes college students persist towards graduation while others stop out and never return to achieve the goal. These theories also represent the history of retention efforts for the past three decades. These areas are broken down into the most notable theories as follows:

## Economic

The heart of this model of retention is focused on weighing the costs and benefits of attending college for a student. Students must be able to see that their personal investment of time, money, and energy will offer them a return on their investment (Becker, 1964). If a student perceives the cost-to-benefit ratio to be skewed and the cost exceeds the benefit, this will likely lead to student attrition (Braxton, 2003). Many potential solutions have developed out of this theory of student retention. Need-based financial aid has made college more affordable to those students most affected by the cost. In addition, a higher focus on post-graduation life has been implemented through the development of College Career Planning Centers and Placement Offices. These services allow students to have a glimpse of what may be available to them after graduating from college. Focusing on these potential careers can protect the view of the investment in the long term.

## Organizational

The basis of this model relates closely to the idea of organizational structure. The idea behind this theory is that student departure lies on the same lines as employee turnover. One of the first proponents of this theory (Price, 1977) identified six independent variables related to job/school satisfaction: pay, having close friends in the environment, participating in decision making, repetition of the work, knowledge of the work environment, and being treated fairly. Bean (1980) who studied this theory further added the following five additional variables that influence student satisfaction: grades, practical value, development, courses, and membership in campus organizations. Viewing the college environment in an organizational way allows student development professionals to develop purposeful programming directed at these variables.

In line with the theory developed by Price (1977) and further developed by Bean (1980), colleges have worked to develop supportive programming to meet the needs of students as defined through the variables outlined in the theory. For example, one of the variables identified to be of importance was the need for distributive justice (Van den Bos, Vermut, & Wilke, 1997). This desire to be treated fairly brought about the need to change the purpose of the Student Government Association (Komives & Woodard, 2003). While a form of student government has been in existence in most colleges for many years, the focus on protecting the rights of students and giving the student a voice is now the charge of this association. In addition, from a more legal view, due process has allowed students a fair way to dispute things they don't perceive as fair. Bean's (1980) additional variables can be reflective of the many developmental courses offered on campuses to give support to the academically struggling students. In addition, many organizations on campus support the need students have to feel like they belong in the campus environment. In his study, Bean (1980) refers to the developing relationship between a student and the college environment as a marriage. The relationship must be supporting yet challenging, safe, yet provoking, and consistent, yet exciting to keep students interested and engaged.

### Psychological

This model of retention is based solely on the psychological attributes and processes of individual students and the effect of those attributes on the ability to matriculate. Some of the noted psychological attributes that may influence a student's ability to persist in a college setting are defined as academic aptitude, motivational states, personality traits, and personal development. According to Bean and Eaton (2000), leaving college is a behavior and behaviors are "psychologically motivated" (p. 49). Identifying the psychological attributes that encourage a

student to staying in college can help college professionals develop supports for those students who may not naturally have those required attributes.

Seidman (2005) established that students enter college with pre-developed characteristics toward higher education. With this information, the development of first year programming can be both focused and useful. Students begin college with a set of characteristics developed through the influence of parents, siblings, high school teachers, and friends (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). These beliefs can be challenged or supported through the interaction of the students with the college environment. This can foster either a positive or negative change in beliefs, depending on the quality of the experience, which can lead to the potential for personal growth on behalf of the student (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

### Sociological

The sociological model of student retention is built on the idea that students are social beings, and the social structure and involvement of students affect the rate of retention. One social factor that influences a student's social belonging is involvement with the campus social structure. In his theory of involvement, Astin (1984) proposes that a student's involvement, whether it is generalized or specific, equates to the quality of the programming and the amount students learn, thus increasing the likelihood of matriculation. A truly involved student is one who invests time and energy in academic relationships with faculty and staff of the college, social relationships with other students through social clubs and organizations, spirited relationships in relating as a member of the campus community, and localized relationships by spending large amounts of time on campus.

The most important practical aspect of this theory is the need for the faculty and staff of an institution of higher education to place emphasis not on the efficacy of teaching or number of students enrolled, but on the relationships with the students that are involved. By focusing on these students, the stragglers who do not build relationships on their own will become evident. It is the responsibility of the faculty and staff, as the professionals on a college campus, to help students connect with people with whom they can relate.

#### Tinto's Interactionalist Theory (Theory of Integration)

The most widely recognized and tested theory of college student retention evolved out of Emile Durkheim's Theory of Suicide (Durkheim, 1951). In this theory, Durkheim relates the many studied reasons for committing suicide to insufficient integration with society. He posits that the isolation from community may be derived from deviant personal characteristics, and/or insufficient personal affiliation between the individual and other people in the society which allows the individual to continue in the development and holding of deviant values (Tinto, 1993). Essentially, Durkheim proposed that although there are many reasons for people to consider suicide as an option, the most prevalent in our society is egotistical suicide. This form of suicide tends to be directly related to social isolation and lack of affiliation with the community.

Spady (1970) proposed a parallel between Durkheim's study and the rate of college students who decide to leave college. Although the decision to drop out of college is not as final as taking one's life, the reasons for leaving college are similar to those studied in relation to egotistical suicide. Students who do not share the values of the college community, do not interact socially with other students, do not develop relationships with faculty and staff, and do

not feel a sense of belonging within the college community are more likely to drop out of college (Spady, 1970).

In his study, Spady (1970) proposed five independent variables that influence a student's retention in post secondary settings. These variables include grade performance, intellectual development, normative congruence, friendship support and the umbrella variable of social integration. Spady (1971) later added two additional variables to his theory that consider the interactions with both the structural relationships and the relationships of all the components together. Tinto (1975) developed this theory further by defining the two systems of college that students strive to feel affiliated with; the academic system and the social system, both of which are equally important.

Tinto (1975) believed and demonstrated through his study that the more involved a student is both academically and socially, the more committed to the goal of the college he or she will be. The more involved a student is academically, the more committed a student will be to attain his or her goal of graduation. The more involved a student is socially, the more committed he or she will be to the college as a whole. Although Tinto refined his theory (1982) the basic premise remains the same. In his revisions to his theory, he recognized the influence of financial resources, the connections with an external community, and experiences within the classroom as additional potential indicators of student retention.

The investigation of student retention in college has been and will continue to be widely studied. Tinto's Interactionalist Theory (Theory of Integration) maintains validity within the higher education field by being further studied and quoted by other theorists, including Pascarella and Chapman (1983), Pascarella and Wolfe (1985), Braxton, Milem, and Sullivan, (2000), and Guiffrida (2006). As the population of college students changes, so will the

programming needs within colleges, but the need for social and academic integration will continue to be a main indicator of retention for students both with and without disabilities.

While improved retention is difficult to attain for general college students, it is even more demanding for students from a marginalized population. These students do not have the same social systems in place to assist with success. Often parents have never attended college, or cultural qualities are not addressed adequately in college. Financial implications may interfere with the ability to persist to graduation. Students from minority groups often matriculate at a ratio of 1:3 (Tinto, 2003). With the rate of 50% in mind for the general population, that would mean that students from a marginalized population have a retention rate of approximately 13%. Of the minority students that leave college without a degree, involuntary departures comprise approximately 15%, while the remaining 85% are considered voluntary departures (Noel, 1986). This speaks loudly to the fact that these students have the capacity to succeed in college; they just do not have the appropriate support.

This difference in retention rates between traditional students and their minority counterparts continue to have a detrimental impact on the advancement of our society. While the population of our country is becoming more diverse, the number of minority students achieving college degrees remains the same. This has been the focus of many retention efforts in recent history (Berkner, He, Cataldi, & Knepper, 2002), but even these efforts seem to exclude the population of students with disabilities.

### Retention of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Students with disabilities do not forge their path through education the same way as traditional students (Kalivoda, in Higbee & Mitchell, 2009). Some students may need to have



classes moved to a classroom that is accessible to wheelchairs. Other students may need all print materials to be translated into Braille, while other may need electronic formats of printed material to have adequate access. Federal guidelines make it the responsibility of public universities to provide appropriate accommodations and modifications to make each course equally accessible for college students with disabilities (ADA, 1990). In addition, students with disabilities who have appropriate documentation of those disabilities must have equal access to social, athletic, and spiritual events sponsored by the university (West, Kregel, Getzel, Ming, Ipsen, & Matlin, 1993).

Several studies over the years have investigated the types of academic accommodations, how accommodations relate to the various disability types, and how those accommodations are administered by disability service providers (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, & Yahaya, 1989; Sergent, Carter, Sedlacek, & Scales, 1988; Tagayuna, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik & Whelley, 2005). However, few researchers have examined the types of accommodations necessary to provide equal access on a college campus, or which accommodations most contribute to student retention (Dukes, 2001).

This notion was further examined through online collaboration with professional members of the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD). The question regarding existing research that was specifically focused on the retention of college students with disabilities was presented to the professional list-serve, and a leading member of this group replied to the inquiry by saying,

“There are no notable studies done since 504/ADA, the presumption is moot that there would be a significantly different retention rate than any other student, so there would be no need to cull them out for any separate research other than whatever the college normally does for all the students. The basic premise being that the students with disabilities are qualified students first, before they qualify as a student with a disability. To me, one has nothing to do with the other and we want to be careful that it is all about access, not success. The college paying

thousands of dollars for access to Braille books has nothing to do with whether the student with a disability passes or fails their classes, or comes back next quarter” (G. Peters, personal communication, May 23, 2013).

This has been the view on this topic for many years. Because the professionals in disability service in higher education represent the ADA as an equal-access law, professionals have advocated that there is no need to study the retention of this group of students separately. In a post regarding tracking the retention of students with disabilities, another professional member of AHEAD posted this comment,

“I agree that having successful students is a good goal for any college. I think where it gets blurry is when people who aren't DS providers don't understand the difference between K-12 special ed., where the focus is on success, and the Disability Services at college where the focus is on access. I feel that Disability Services has been successful if they provide an audio copy of a book for a student with a visual disability. Now, say that student walks around with the CD in their bag all semester, rather than listening to it, and they fail the class. Or a student who utilizes a private room/extended time, but does not study for the test, and fails the test or the class. In my opinion, this would not mean that Disability Services has failed” (S. Skwara, January 28, 2012).

With the focus placed so heavily on specific accommodations and the accommodation process, disability professionals gathered to form a professional organization called the Association of Handicapped Student Service Programs in Postsecondary Education (AHSSPE). This organization was initially organized in 1978 and has been reorganized into what is now known as the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). This professional organization's membership is made up of professionals in the field of disability services in higher education. The purpose of this organization is to advocate for high-quality service provision for students with disabilities in higher education. This organization also is in place to assist disability professionals with determining reasonable accommodations, program evaluation, legal guidance, and serves as a resource for networking and professional development (Sneed, 2006).

In 1997, AHEAD worked diligently to develop a code of ethics and a set of 27 professional standards to help guide the work of professionals in this field (Shaw, McGuire, & Madaus, 1997). By gathering focused input from over 1,000 disability administrators (Dukes, 2001), AHEAD developed the professional standards around eight domains that represent essential service components that are necessary to provide students with disabilities equal access to higher education (Shaw & Dukes, 2005). These domains are identified as consultation/collaboration, information dissemination, faculty/staff awareness, academic adjustments, counseling and self-determination, policies and procedures, program evaluation, and training and professional development (Shaw & Dukes, 2001). In 2005, AHEAD further identified 147 performance indicators under each professional standard to serve as guidance for best practices in the field (Association of Higher Education and Disability, 2004).

While there is an increased focus on standardizing the profession of disability-service providers, there are still no degree requirements, certifications, or mandated continuing education necessary to become a disability-service administrator. The legal requirements of this profession are significant and change frequently; however, there are currently no mandates for professional training. This profession has seen an increase in the number of universities that offer educational programs for personnel to become prepared to work with students with disabilities in higher education. Currently, there are five schools in the United States that offer graduate degrees in Disability Studies and another 11 schools that offer concentrated studies in disability studies (Taylor & Zubal-Ruggieri, 2012). This growth in degree programs of this type demonstrates a focus on the research and preparation needed to effectively perform the tasks of this career.

Despite the spotlighted legislation, and increased focus on the profession of disability service provision in higher education, people with disabilities are less likely to stay enrolled in

college, earn postsecondary degrees and secure employment (Horn & Berkold, 1999, Horn & Bobbitt, 2004; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996; Yelin & Katz, 1994). This is of particular concern for this population. People with disabilities have historically had a higher rate of unemployment than people without disabilities. According to Stodden & Dowrick (2001), the positive correlation between the level of education and rate of employment is much stronger for this population.

The lack of persistence to graduation for students with disabilities can be attributed to many barriers. In an attempt to address these barriers adequately, Malakpa (1997) narrowed them to five main categories. These categories include: (1) limited involvement by campus administration (2) physical, programmatic and attitudinal accessibility (3) lack of supportive services (4) the isolative attitudes put forth by faculty and the university community as a whole, and (5) general personal problems related to disabilities. These categories will be expanded upon in the following paragraphs.

#### Limited involvement by campus administration

The difficulties facing students with disabilities in a university setting are paramount. One person alone cannot manage such difficulties. Unfortunately, managing disability services is often the job of one person or a small team of professionals. The show of support given by the university's administration is often equal to hiring one person to manage all of the needs of students registered with disability-service offices. This one person is often educated about the specific implications of various disabilities and how to neutralize the impact of those disabilities. University administration typically does not understand the types of disabilities and the differences in the educational needs of each specific disability (McLoughlin, 1982). It is often

because of this lack of understanding that administration stays uninvolved. Such uninvolved administrators do not establish strict guidelines around the accommodation process, which leaves students with disabilities open to uncooperative professors who do not understand the requirements of the law (West, et al., 1993). Studies have been conducted to measure the level of disability awareness among college administration and faculty. These studies have shown that the lack of understanding permeates all levels of the campus community, including presidents (West, 2008) as well as faculty members (Dona & Edmister, 2001).

#### Physical, programmatic, and attitudinal accessibility

When the term accessibility is brought up, the image of wheelchairs and ramps to ensure access to the buildings often comes to mind, but accessibility is much more than physical access. A disability can come in different shapes and sizes, and, therefore, so does accessibility. While the most blatant form of inaccessibility comes in the shape of architectural barriers, programmatic barriers are often the first barriers that students need to overcome. While it is illegal to screen out people with disabilities through policies (ADA, 1990), one of the most difficult entrance requirements to manage for students with disabilities are the SAT and ACT scores. Making these tests completely accessible to students is a difficult task even though the predictive nature of these tests is not clear (Bennet & Regosta, 1984).

Potentially the most harmful barrier presented on the university campus is the attitudinal barriers presented by faculty and staff. The attitudes, knowledge and teaching skills have an enormous impact on the learning of all students (Burgstahler & Doe, 2006). It is unfortunate that many faculty members have little to no experience teaching students with disabilities (Yuen & Shaughnessy, 2001). Faculty and staff tend to be willing to make accommodations for students

with physical or sensory disabilities, but are not as willing to provide accommodations for students with disabilities that are not visible, such as learning or psychiatric disabilities (Aksamit, Leuenberger, & Morris, 1987; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999).

### Support services

Persistence toward graduation for students with disabilities depends in part on the support services that they receive. Although it would be ideal for all members of the campus community to have an understanding of disabilities and the impact they may have on learning, that is not currently a reality. It is the charge of the disability-service office on any campus to make sure that the appropriate accommodations are in place and the campus is as accessible as possible. Further, it is the staff members of this office and the knowledge they possess that can shape the higher-education experience of students with disabilities. According to Malakpa (1997), without these basic services, students with disabilities in higher education will be “destined for frustration and agony” (p. 18).

### Isolative attitudes

Aside from attitudinal barriers set up by unknowing faculty and staff, the attitudes of students, faculty and staff can go further into the discriminatory side of presentation. Among the university population as a whole, students with disabilities often face prejudice at all levels (Hill, 1992). Not only do people not understand the necessity of accommodations or modifications, but students with disabilities are often condemned for simply trying to take part in higher education (West et al., 1993).

Faculty members and staff are the people that students turn to for the knowledge they seek. It is these university members who can cause the most damage with their attitudes. Some faculty members feel that reasonable accommodations may compromise the academic integrity of their course (Nelson, Dodd, & Smith, 1990), yet it is these accommodations that make their course accessible for students with disabilities. Faculty may see these accommodations as ways for students to seek an unfair advantage over other students. Lack of disabilities-related knowledge and sensitivity on the part of faculty members and staff at universities may cause many students with disabilities to forego chances of graduation.

#### Personal issues related to disabilities

Myths and misconceptions about disabilities create troubling situations for students with disabilities on college campuses. These misconceptions create potentially the most harmful and personally defeating problem faced by people with disabilities. They cause students with disabilities to feel excluded from the campus community. Feeling excluded from the community that they live in every day makes students with disabilities feel that they don't belong (Hill, 1992), and this leads to attrition. In order to navigate the college system, students with disabilities must learn to advocate for themselves, educate people about the impact of their disabilities, request accommodations, and prove why such accommodations are needed, all while trying to manage the same workload of typical college students. According to Thoma and Getzel (2005) students who actively self-advocate, develop an understanding of their respective disability, and display self-determination will be more successful in reaching their goals than those students who do not.

## Summary

Because there has been more importance placed on measuring and increasing the retention of college students (Seidman, 2005), the focus and study of retention rates should start including students with disabilities. Just as first generation students, female students, international student, or other populations of minority students are studied, so should the population of students with disabilities. Although the difficulties faced by students with disabilities and the institution they attend seem challenging to manage, this should not interfere with the civil rights of the students. The question is no longer “if” students with disabilities attend college, but “when” they attend college, how can colleges teach them appropriately and support them to graduation? By asking students who have been successfully retained in college what made them stay, professionals can gain an accurate understanding of what makes students with disabilities stay in college.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research design**

This exploratory study made use of campus demographic information, qualitative data from interviews; rich, descriptive information from campus visits; and interview data from interviews with disability service directors to gain an understanding of what encourages college students with disabilities to stay in school. By using a combination of information in this qualitatively based exploratory research project, this researcher was able to use the case study research strategy (Berg, 2007) to gain insight from participants in an authentic context.

Through the review of the literature regarding the history of college student retention, five major models of college student retention were prevalent. These five models include; economic model, organizational model, psychological model, sociological model, and interactional model. The information presented through the literatures for each of these models served as a basis for defining the overall research questions as well as the individual questions included in the interview protocols. For the purpose of this study, this researcher sought to answer the following two questions:

Research Question 1, what factors contribute to the retention of college students with disabilities?

Research Question 2, Which services provided by disability-service offices are considered most valuable by students who receive the services?

## Population and sample

The purpose of this study was to build on the established field of research regarding the retention of college students. Information regarding the retention of college students with disabilities is limited (Moxley, Najor-Durak, & Dumbrique, 2004); therefore, this research will contribute to the understanding of this population as a whole. By developing the interview questions directly from the theoretical framework of the outlined retention theories, examining the philosophy of disability-service providers, and taking the background support of students with disabilities into account, this study has helped to develop an understanding of how the college experience for students with disabilities compares to that of students without disabilities.

The sample for this study was purposive in nature as the population to be studied was very specific. The sample for this study included two upper-level students registered with the disability-service departments at each of five public, four-year universities in southeastern United States. At each school visited, one student participant was registered with an invisible disability and the other was registered with a visible disability. For the purpose of this study, the term “invisible disability” is classified as any disability that is not readily observable. The term “visible disability” is classified as any disability that can be observed. Information was gathered from universities that were classified as large sized institutions. These public universities have a total student populations of between 10,000 and 20,000 students.

## Dependability and Trustworthiness

Although the terms validity and reliability are concepts typically used to evaluate quantitative research, according to Patton (2002), these concepts are factors that qualitative researchers should also focus on while designing a study, analyzing the data and reporting on the

findings. To solidify and persuade readers that the results are “worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290), researchers must justify the validity of the research in the qualitative paradigm by qualitative terms (Healy & Perry, 2000). Within the qualitative paradigm the terms for ensuring quality and rigor are different (Maxwell, 1992). Instead of referring to reliability and validity, qualitative researchers refer to terms such as credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stenbacka, 2001). More specifically, qualitative researchers tend to use the terms dependability and trustworthiness to define the quality and rigor of a study (Golafshani, 2003). In quantitative terms, reliability is a consequence of the validity of the study (Patton, 2002); therefore, the trustworthiness of this study will be the primary way to show quality and rigor of the completed research.

Because qualitative research is more subjective in nature, it is more difficult to prove quality and rigor (Padgett, 2004). To help guide the enhancement of the academic rigor, Padgett (1998) offers six strategies from which to choose. These strategies include prolonged engagement, triangulation (Mathison, 1988), peer debriefing and support, member checking, negative case analysis, and auditing. The strategies adopted for this study to ensure trustworthiness are triangulation and peer debriefing.

### Triangulation

Data triangulation is a method of using multiple sources and people for obtaining data on the research topic (Patten, 2005). In addition, researcher triangulation involves forming a team of researchers to analyze the data (Patten, 2005). For the purpose of this study, both data and researcher triangulation were used.

While semi-structured interviews (Berg, 2007; Patten, 2005) are the main form of information gathering within this study, this researcher attempted to gain a complete picture of the environment at each university for students with disabilities. By forming a holistic impression of the university, potential contributing factors for retention of college students with disabilities can be identified. To gain this holistic impression of each university, this researcher gathered data by acting as a non-participant observer during the visits at the universities. I observed and reported detailed information regarding the interactions between staff and students and between the students themselves in the office. In addition, data about the disability-service programs presented through the websites, documentation guidelines, brochures, welcome letters, and recognitions on the walls of the office were analyzed and documented. All information gathered was information that is presented to the public, so it is safe to assume that it is a valid portrayal of the information. This data triangulation contributed to the accurate understanding of the gathered information.

During the interview-transcribing phase, this researcher employed the following method of researcher triangulation to guarantee that the transcript was an accurate depiction of the interview process. Multiple investigators, bound by confidentiality, listened to the interview together and transcribed the word for word discussion into one transcript. This helped assure that the highest level of accuracy was achieved. These investigators contributed equally to the theme development of the gathered data. When they did not agree on themes or data placement, it was reported openly along with the solution to the disagreement.

## Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is the review of the data and research process by someone – the peer debriefer – that is familiar with the study and serves in the role of supporter, challenger, and devil’s advocate (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This peer debriefer challenges the researcher assumptions and questions the methods and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purpose of this study, it was vital to establish a peer debriefer that was external to the study, but familiar with the topic. In addition, this person was collaborative in nature and was available consistently over the time of the study to offer feedback and discuss direction throughout each stage of the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Throughout the process of methodology development, protocol development, interview transcription, and data analysis, the method of peer debriefing served as a constant challenge to maintain credibility. During the development phase of the study, the peer debriefer challenged the method of interviewing only students. Through this feedback, the study expanded to interviewing students and directors as well as conducting thorough observations of each department to give a holistic view of the experiences of students at the respective universities. While developing the interview protocol, the peer debriefer challenged the purpose of the questions included in the protocol. This challenge encouraged the development of the interview protocol around the theories discussed in the theoretical framework section of the literature review. This allowed for an interview protocol that was more focused and grounded in theory. Finally, as the data analysis process progressed and the triangulation of the data filtered through the investigators, the peer debriefer challenged the perspectives of each investigator. This process allowed for rich discussions and professional challenges to contribute to the development of the most useful and descriptive themes to derive conclusions for this study.

## Instrumentation

The interview questionnaire for this study was developed after studying the various retention theories most often cited in the field of higher education. The theories studied address the economic, organizational, sociological, and psychological implications of college on students (Astin, 1984; Becker, 1964; Bentler & Speckart, 1979; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Price & Mueller, 1981; Rootman, 1972; Tinto, 2003b). Important factors from each of these theories were included in the interview protocol development. This theoretical framework is the primary focus of the literature review. Prior to engaging in any research based contact, the interview protocols and other research information were presented to the Institutional Review Board for approval. See Appendix A. In addition, the informed consent form used in the interview process appears in Appendix B.

The final instrument included four sections. These are defined as follows.

Section 1: This section included demographic information about the university. Questions included items such as the physical and population size of the college, geographic location, retention rate of the general college population, and size of the case load of students with disabilities. See Appendix C.

Section 2: This section included the observations and information gathered from public record regarding the disability service offices within each school. See Appendix D.

Section 3: This section included the interview protocol for the interview with the administrators of the disability services offices. This protocol focused on the administrators of each office visited. These administrators were either directors or assistant directors of the offices. See Appendix E

Section 4: This section was the actual interview questions. This protocol focused on two upper level students with disabilities at each of the universities. The questions on this interview centered on the social, academic and emotional sides of postsecondary education for students with disabilities. See Appendix F.

#### Research Procedure

Following the development of the research instrument, public universities in the five states identified as the Southeast were researched. These states included Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina and South Carolina. One public, four-year, university with a total student enrollment of between 10,000 and 20,000 students was identified as the university to be studied for each state. For the state of Tennessee, students attended East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, Tennessee. For the state of Alabama, students attended the University of Alabama in Birmingham, Alabama. For the state of North Carolina, students attended Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. For the state of South Carolina, students attended the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. Representative students were identified for the state of Georgia but after the visit and interview process, the administrator for that school was not comfortable in disclosing the name of the university and asked to be removed from the study.

The director for each disability-service office was identified and contacted. During the phone contact, the study and the potential use of the results were explained. A brief phone interview regarding the services available through the disability-service office was also conducted. Following the initial contact, the demographic questionnaire was emailed to the disability-services director of each chosen university. A deadline to be included in the study was

set and communicated to the participants. The deadline was set for one month from the initial emailing of the questionnaire. Following the emailing of the initial questionnaire, visits to the participating universities were scheduled. The directors of the disability-service programs were asked to elicit volunteers from their established student population to take part in structured interviews upon the date of the visit. These students were to be either junior, senior, or graduate students with either an invisible or a visible disability and of traditional college age so as to give an accurate comparison.

During the site visit to the disability-service office, this researcher acted as a non-participant observer and took thick, rich descriptive (Creswell & Miller, 2000) notes of what was seen and heard among interactions with staff and students. In addition, time was spent investigating the web site, documentation guidelines, form letters regarding the office, and any other archival data to which I could easily access.

Finally, an informal interview was conducted with the disability-service director at each university to gain an understanding of the operating protocols of each office. This interview helped to identify the philosophy of the disability-service office and staff. Questions helped differentiate between a legalistic approach and a more humanistic approach to disability services.

Meeting notes, distribution dates, copies of the questionnaire and responses, and interview transcripts were kept in a locked file cabinet while the project was progressing. Student names were immediately coded and deleted from all interview forms. Anonymity and confidentiality of participating students and institutions was upheld throughout this project.



## Data Analysis

Information gathered from section one of this study was presented as demographic facts to provide a detailed picture of the universities studied. Facts and charts representing the general population of each university, the caseload of students with disabilities at the university, and the style of disability services based on detailed observation records and archival data review was presented.

Information gathered from sections two and three was qualitative in nature. Observation data from each location were coded and reflected on in the comparisons of each university. The interviews were transcribed, and then all tapes or digital files used were destroyed. Once the information was transcribed, it was possible to develop themes from the information. This researcher used the method of open coding to open the inquiry (Merriam, 1998). According to Berg (2007), “the most thorough analysis of the material can happen only after all the material has been coded” (p. 317).

After the collected information was open-coded, themes were developed through the constant-comparative method of qualitative data analysis. Merriam (1998) identifies this method of data analysis as one of the most widely used methods in qualitative studies. In this method, data from a set are compared to those from another set to define similarities and differences. Out of this constant comparison, themes emerged to help us understand what supports students with disabilities attributed to their retention in college.

This method of data analysis took place throughout the research project. Because the analysis of qualitative data tends to be ongoing and iterative, analysis began immediately after the interview responses were transcribed and continued throughout the entire process. All responses were initially coded into themes developed around the five retention models that made

up the theoretical framework for this dissertation. These five themes included economic model, organizational model, psychological model, sociological model, and interactional model. This initial open-coding strategy made the process of further analysis into more detailed themes a more organized process.

After all responses for all interviews were open-coded into the five main categories, a team of investigators worked together to analyze the data in a more minute way. By adopting what Berg (2007) refers to as axial coding (p. 320), the group made connections between the initial broad themes to identify possible causes, relationships, and interactions between themes. Together, the three investigators explored consistently emerging themes. Data were organized and re-organized constantly into subcategories revising, deleting, or developing new coded themes as necessary (Wholey, Hatley, & Newcomer, 2004). Throughout this process, the peer debriefer (Creswell & Miller, 2000) challenged the researcher and analysis team to think clearly about the themes as they emerged. This peer debriefer asked difficult questions and encouraged the team to examine the relationships among the data instead of trying to fit the data into existing themes. As the investigators worked through the data together, agreements and disagreements were noted.

### Pilot Study

To prepare for this large scale research project, a pilot study was conducted at the researcher's home institution of The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) during the 2007-2008 academic year. At the time of the pilot study, UTC was classified as a public, four year institution, with a population of approximately 9,558 undergraduate and graduate students. UTC is a metropolitan university located in urban Chattanooga, Tennessee. The admission

standards for this University are a 2.75 GPA and 17 ACT score. The mean age of undergraduate students at UTC is 22.2 years of age and the mean age of graduate students is 31.8 years of age. The mean age for the total student population is 23.6 years of age. The ethnic makeup of UTC student is as follows: 77.8% Caucasian; 17.6% African American; 2.6% Asian; 1.6% Hispanic; .4% Native American.

A one-year retention study was conducted at the UTC with the assistance of the Director of University Planning, Evaluation, and Research. This study produced surprising results. The overall one-year retention rate of freshman from the fall semester of 2007 to the fall semester of 2008 was 65%. The one-year retention rate for freshman students registered with The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) during that same time frame was 75%. Because the difficulties that students with disabilities face are well known, this 10% difference was unexpected. In the pilot study, 12 students registered with OSD were interviewed. These students ranged in age, gender, disability type, and socioeconomic status.

## Data Collection

The reasons college students with disabilities stay in college was examined through the opinions of college students with disabilities. Because of the personal nature of the responses and the value added to the opinions of these students, an informal interview process was used to collect data. A general list of eight interview questions was developed to serve as starter questions for each interview. The interview took place during the fall semester of 2008 and each interview took approximately one hour.

The interviews took place in the university's Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) in Frist Hall. Many students come to the OSD to gain equal access to the educational

environment at UTC. This has helped establish the OSD as a safe place on campus where the students can feel like they really belong and have support. Because the OSD is seen as a safe place and it is also convenient for most students, interviews were scheduled to take place there.

Interviews were recorded using a digital tape recorder with the permission of the participants. Interviews were then transcribed word-for-word and were checked against the recording for accuracy. The transcripts and digital tape recorder were locked up with the files for each participant. After explaining the results of the retention study, the following questions were presented as starter questions:

- 1) What is your initial opinion about why students with disabilities stay in college?
- 2) What experiences do you think are different for you as a college student with a disability?
- 3) Do you feel like you “belong” at UTC? Explain why or why not.
- 4) Who has been your main support system since coming to college?
- 5) What supports outside of the disabilities office have you used recently?
- 6) How did you find out that those services are available to students?
- 7) What has been the most helpful part about being registered with the Office for Students with Disabilities?
- 8) If you had to choose one thing that has made you stay in college, what would it be?

The transcripts from the interviews were reviewed several times by the researcher. During these review sessions, themes were developed and information was coded into those themes. The themes from each review session were then compared and collapsed into a final theme list for each question. Quotes depicting the variety of answers and representing the theme for each subsequent question were extracted and noted in the research.

The primary research questions were not completely answered through the pilot study, so the initial interview questions were improved. Changes to the initial question list included the addition of questions regarding the services offered at the disability-service office and the most useful services to meet their specific needs. The revised interview protocol can be found in Appendix F. In addition, a full interview protocol was developed to determine the philosophy of the disability-service program. This protocol was developed to interview the director of the disability program. This interview protocol can be found in Appendix E.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to build on the established field of research regarding the retention of college students. Because the retention of college students with disabilities has not been studied to a great extent (Moxley, Najor-Durak, & Dumbrique, 2004), this research will contribute to the understanding of this population as a whole. The data for this study was collected in three distinct ways and each will be presented in this chapter.

This chapter is divided into three sections building on each of the data collection methods. The first section includes demographic information gathered through site visits to the identified universities in the southeast region of the United States. This information allows a comparison of the general population of the university with the caseload of students receiving support from the disability-services office. The geographic location of the campus and retention rate of the general university population will also be analyzed. Section two includes information gathered through interviews with the disability-service directors at each identified university. This information allows the researcher to examine the philosophy of the support program and how that identified philosophy correlates with the retention of the established population of students with disabilities. Finally, section three includes the coded and themed data from the structured interviews with students with disabilities. Two students at each university were interviewed using an established set of interview questions. These students were chosen by the disability-service provider based on the identification of having an invisible disability versus an

apparent disability. This distinction allows a comparison of themed responses based on the impact of the invisible disability. Each student responded to a series of eleven questions directed at identifying the factors that most contributed to his or her determination to stay in college.

### Research design

This study was designed to be exploratory in nature, and made use of campus demographic information, qualitative data from interviews, descriptive information from campus visits, and interview data from interviews with disability service directors to gain an understanding of what encourages college students with disabilities to stay in school. By making use of the case study strategy, this researcher was able to gain insight into the key factors that supported students with disabilities throughout college and encouraged them to persist through graduation in an authentic context.

### Demographic information

For the purpose of this study, five universities were selected to be site studies. These universities represented public, four-year universities in the southeastern United States. These universities each have a total student population between 10,000 and 20,000 students, receive federal funding, and are found within the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama.

Following the site visit and interviews, the identified university in Georgia had concerns about including the demographic information in the study. After many conversations with the representative of the disability-service office regarding the confidentiality of the responses, no understanding of agreed-upon presentation methods could be reached. Due to this impasse, the

university representing the state of Georgia has been removed from the study. The demographic information for the universities identified from the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama will be presented with a discussion comparing the information at the end of this section. The universities visited include Appalachian State in North Carolina, The College of Charleston in South Carolina, East Tennessee State University in Tennessee, and The University of Alabama Birmingham in Alabama.

Table 1.1 includes demographic information for each school studied. Information regarding the location, total student enrollment, enrollment of students with disabilities (swd), the average age, ethnic make-up, and one year retention rate is represented.



Table 1.1 *Campus Demographic Information*

University and Location	Total Student Enrollment	SWD	Average age	Ethnic Make-up (%)		One-Year Retention Rate (%)
Appalachian State University Boone, North Carolina	16,023	~500	24.3	Caucasian	93.0	87.6
				African American	3.0	
				Hispanic	2.0	
				Other	2.0	
College of Charleston Charleston, South Carolina	11,649	~785	22.9	Caucasian	83.4	83.2
				African American	5.8	
				Hispanic	3.2	
				Other	7.6	
East Tennessee State University Johnson City, Tennessee	13,870	~800	31.2	Caucasian	85.6	69.6
				African American	4.8	
				Hispanic	1.4	
				Other	8.2	
University of Alabama-Birmingham Birmingham, Alabama	17,543	~400	27.8	Caucasian	60.6	80.0
				African American	26.3	
				Hispanic	2.0	
				Other	11.1	

Notes: SWD=Registered students with qualified disabilities

The universities visited were comparable in size with a total student population between 10,000 students and 20,000 students. According to the 2010 Disability Status Report (Erickson, et. al, 2012) the national average for college-aged people with disabilities is nearly 11%. This could be a prediction that the population of students registered with disabilities at the identified universities would range from 1100 students with disabilities to 2200 students with disabilities. In reality, the average number of students with disabilities registered at the identified universities is only 621.25 students.

To adequately compare the retention of college students with disabilities, one must be able to compare the retention rates of the total student population. All of the identified universities publish a fact book with this information but each presents this information in different formats. The one data point that each presents in a similar way was a one-year retention rate from freshman-to-sophomore year for the total student population. These rates range from the lowest rate of 69.6% to the highest rate of 87.6% with an average one-year retention rate of 80.1%. In alignment with the current status of research regarding the retention rates of college students with disabilities, none of the researched universities tracked the retention rates of this population, so there is no way to quantitatively compare this information.

The final piece of information considered notable in this demographic comparison is the geographic location of each of these universities. Of the four identified universities, two are located in what can be identified as an urban area and the other two are located in more rural areas. The University of Alabama Birmingham and The College of Charleston are both located in the heart of the downtown areas while Appalachian State and East Tennessee State University are located in more rural areas surrounded by the Appalachian Mountains.

## Disability-service provider interviews

For the purpose of analyzing the information gathered in this section the initial interview protocol will be revisited. By referring back to this established list of interview questions, a natural framework for discussion is established. The only established guidance for providing assistance with disability access according to the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA), (2008) is that there must be a person designated as an ADA Coordinator. Because the guidance under the ADAAA is so vague, each university can establish disability services as they see fit. This means that disability-service offices can be very focused and narrow or broad and far reaching. They can provide only required accommodations, or they can provide student support that is not required, they can follow the letter of the law and take a legalistic stance, or they can follow the spirit of the law and take a more humanistic stance. This vague guidance allows for a great comparison for what types of programming contribute most to the retention of students with disabilities.

Interview question D1: What philosophy of disability service do you employ  
as the director of this program?

The philosophy of the director of the disability-services office often guides the staff interaction with the students with disabilities. While all of the directors expressed a goal to make all things offered by or sponsored by the respective universities accessible to all, there were two distinct ways the directors worked to achieve that goal. In response to this question, this researcher noticed two distinct themes. The directors either responded with a desire to take on a case-management style or a desire to foster true independence in the student with whom he or she works.

The directors that took on a more case-management style made comments such as, “*our students should not have to run around campus looking for answers when I can find them with a quick phone call (J. Steele, personal communication, April 19, 2010)*” and “*my students know they can come to me with any question and if I don’t know the answer, I can find it for them (V. Dubose, personal communication, January 24, 2012)*”. This approach lends itself to creating a sense of strong advocacy for the students, but at the same time it can create a sense of overdependence.

The directors that sought to foster more independence made comments such as, “*we shoot for fair and equal treatment for all. It’s not about extra, it’s about equal (M. Maxey, personal communication, October 21, 2011)*” and “*we should put ourselves out of business because they no longer need us. We should support all college students in developing independence (L. Gibson, personal communication, October 20, 2011)*”. This approach is in line with the role of student support services by helping students develop a strong sense of self advocacy. It can also be interpreted as less supportive as students transition from the highly supported world of the Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade education system.

One thing to note in the responses to this question is the language used in referring to the population of students with disabilities. In the departments that used a more case-management approach, the directors referred to the students as “my students” or “our students.” While this language could help develop a sense of belonging within the disability-service office, it could also make students with disabilities feel separate from the general student population. In the departments that seemingly wanted to foster independence, the language reflected more of a university-wide approach. In comparison with the interviews with the students at these universities, the students felt a sense of belonging within the university as a whole.

Interview question D2: What does the organizational chart  
look like for your office?

The number of professional staff and the focus of the department can be a reflection of how the university views the work of the disability-services department. By inquiring about the organizational chart, one can get a clear picture of the level of commitment by the university administration to disability access. In looking at the responses to this question, two interesting themes emerged. Building on the focused philosophy from question one, the themes for this question aligned with previously noted themes. The departments that took on a more case-management approach employed the traditional director and assistant director position, but each also employed either part-time or full-time personal counselors. The departments that sought to foster independence employed a true university-wide approach in that they did not only manage accommodations and accessibility for students with disabilities, but they also managed these requests for employees and visitors to the university.

Personal counseling is a benefit to anyone who may need this level of support in his or her life, but this support is typically offered through the university counseling center. This is the case in the departments that also employ personal counselors. It is unclear why these departments would need to have separate counselors for students with disabilities; however, in comparing these departments with the responses of the students, it is clear that the students feel emotionally supported by the staff of the department. One student said *“this is the place I can just come to cry if I need to.”*

The departments that managed disability access for all students, employees, and visitors also were the departments that sought to foster independence. This could be attributed to the

focus on providing access for all. This holistic approach to the accommodation process encourages all university personnel to think about access proactively instead of reactively. Both of the directors for these programs also spoke to the level of importance placed on disability access as well. One of the directors made the comment, “*when I started managing accommodations for employees I started to have more recognition as the expert on campus (M. Maxey, personal communication, October 21, 2011)*”. This comment correlated directly with a student interview from that university. The student responded to an interview question about the most helpful part about the disability-service office by saying, “*I usually try to manage things on my own, but when I have a situation that is too difficult to manage or a faculty member doesn’t want to give me my accommodation, I know that [the director] will take care of it very quickly.*”

Interview question D3: Do you employ a generalist or specialist focus in managing your program?

The purpose of this question was to examine whether the department was functioning out of necessity for the population size or if they were more proactive in how they manage the needs of the program. There were no significant responses to note. Each department responded that they operate within a generalist focus, meaning that all the staff members in the department know about all the different types of disabilities and can work adequately with any type of need. This typically means that the departments work collaboratively and help each other manage the demands of the work. By adopting a generalist focus, anyone can step away from the job and another staff member can pick up the work without any hesitation.

The only difference in these responses was a shared difference among all the directors. While each department takes on a generalist focus, there is someone identified within each

department that manages the accommodation process for people with hearing impairments. One director stated, *“The only specialized area is for the deaf and hard of hearing, but that is out of necessity. That group requires a specialized skill set, but the staff member that manages that has trained us to fill in if needed and she can fill in for us as well. We all play well together, not parallel play (L. Gibson, personal communication, October 20, 2011)”*.

Interview question D4: What programs make you the most proud?

The programming that takes place within each department is also a reflection of the focus of the director and university culture as a whole. It is notable that the similar themes from the previous questions also emerged. In revisiting the philosophy of the directors, one theme embraced case management while the other embraced fostering independence. The department that took on the case-management style focused on direct programming with students that made academic success easier to accomplish while the department that fostered independence focused more on the influence the department had on the campus as a whole.

Within the first theme, both directors responded about individual programs offered to support students in and out of the classroom. One director responded by saying, *“We have a two year foreign language requirement that is very difficult for many of our students but we offer a program in which our students that have disabilities can waive this requirement (J. Steele, personal communication, April 19, 2010)”*. The other director responded to this question by saying, *“our academic coaching program is really unique in that our students who are struggling academically can work with our counselors individually to support any need the student has. It is very student driven (V. Dubose, personal communication, January 24, 2012)”*.

Within the second theme, the focus of both directors was on the influence of their departments within the university community, which contributed to equal access and independence on their respective campuses. One director reacted to this question by bringing out many examples of programs offered from various departments on campus that were focused on academic areas, but were purposeful in planning to naturally accommodate for people with disabilities. She said, *“The thing that makes me the most proud is the culture shift that has happened on our campus since our own organizational shift. Since taking on all disability related tasks for the entire campus, people are more focused on disability access and thinking proactively (M. Maxey, personal communication, October 21, 2011)”*.

Interview question D5: What part of your program needs further development?

Following in the trend of the previous questions, responses to this question fell in line with the established philosophies of the director. The case-management style departments focused the responses more on specific types of programming that need to be further developed while the independence fostering style departments focused more on resource development to further their work.

The directors that encourage a case-management approach to their case load of students with disabilities responded to this question by pointing out programs within their departments that were weak and would further support the development of their student population. One of the directors pointed out a weakness in their adaptive technology program by stating, *“We don’t have anyone on staff that has a good understanding of adaptive technology. We need to develop this so our students can come here to work on their coursework and have the technological support they need (V. Dubose, personal communication, January 24, 2012)”*. The other director



under this philosophy focused on the need to provide more direct support for students on the Autism spectrum. Talking about the number of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders attending the university highlighted this. She went on to say, “*We have talked about developing a fee for service type of program for our students with Autism so we can really monitor their social interactions and give them the guidance they need to be successful (J. Steele, personal communication, April 19, 2010)*”.

This focus on individual programs within the department can have a great impact on the development of the program in general, but the narrow focus will have limited impact on the greater university community. While the programs highlighted would provide better support for specific students, they would also require the students with disabilities to go to the disability-services department to make use of the programs. This would, again, foster a great sense of belonging within the disability-services department, but would not do a lot to foster the sense of belonging within the university community as a whole.

The directors that maintained the philosophy of fostering independence within people with disabilities focused their responses more on the resource development within the department so they can have a greater impact on the university. It is important to note that these two directors were the directors that have recently shifted to taking on all the disability access needs for the entire campus. Each of them responded to this question from the perspective of resource development. One director pointed out, “*With the added responsibility of the campus community disability needs, we really need more staff. I would like to develop our training and advocacy program for employees of the university but we really struggle to just maintain right now with the staff we have (M. Maxey, personal communication, October 21, 2011)*”. The other director followed in that same line of thinking by pointing out that her department needs rested in

faculty and staff development. She replied, “*Our campus professionals need to develop a better understanding of what constitutes a reasonable accommodation, but frankly, with everything else, I just don’t have the time or staff to do this (L. Gibson, personal communication, October 20, 2011)*”.

This focus on resource development could potentially have a greater impact on the university community. By developing the fiscal and human resource within the department to support the organizational shifts that have already taken place, these departments could see their influence on the university culture come to fruition. This culture shift that has disability access always in focus from the planning stages to the evaluation of coursework, programming, and employment, could significantly impact the university as a whole. This approach could have a far greater impact than the development of individual programs within the disability-service office.

Interview question D6: What accommodations are most used  
by the students in this department?

The purpose of this question was to highlight the most needed and used accommodations offered by the disability-services departments. Not surprisingly, the accommodations that were discussed as the most widely used were the testing accommodations. This includes testing with extended time and in a distraction reduced environment. This is an accommodation that is widely used by students with any type of disability and it is very easy to manage so it is not uncommon for this to be the most offered and most used accommodation. The surprising aspect of this question is the realignment of the responders.

In the previous questions, there were two distinct groups within the responders. For this question, three of the directors responded that the most used accommodation was testing

accommodations, while the single outlier responded that advocacy was the most used accommodations. The director that responded that advocacy was the most used went on to say, *“Testing used to be the most used accommodation, but I really feel that the faculty should be managing these accommodations. These are not ‘my students’ in ‘my class’ so it is the responsibility of the faculty (L. Gibson, personal communication, October 20, 2011)”*. This response represents a true shift in philosophy of the director, but she followed up this question by saying, *“We have had a lot of pushback from faculty because it is difficult for them to manage. We still help with the specific needs like readers or scribes, but we are sticking to our expectations on this (L. Gibson, personal communication, October 20, 2011)”*. This response may represent a pendulum swing too far in the other direction too quickly. While the purpose is understood, the practicality of this approach may require more planning.

Interview question D7: How is your program different than  
other disability-service programs?

As intended, this question brought to the surface, the characteristics that make each department unique. Every disability-service department has things they must do according to the ADAAA. It is what the directors value that make the programs varied. This is the only question asked that did not have any shared themes in the responses. The responses ranged from specific support programs to how the program operates.

The only response that related unmistakably to the identified philosophy of the director was one in which the director took a case-management approach and responded to this question by identifying a student support program. She stated, *“I am proud of our academic coaching*

*program. Students know they can come here to our office and someone will just sit with them and work on their school work (V. Dubose, personal communication, January 24, 2012)”.*

The rest of the responses were not as directly aligned with the philosophical approach of the director as they were related to the operation of the department. Although the responses were only loosely tied to a theme of department operational guidelines, they did give insight into what the directors view as important.

As programs grow and legal mandates change, the documentation guidelines and definition of disabilities change as well. One director tied the distinction within the office to this movement. When asked what makes the department different than others, the director replied, *“We don’t necessarily look for severity within our documentation guidelines. We have a much more expansive approach to disability (V. Dubose, personal communication, January 24, 2012)”.*

The other two responses suggested both an expanded work load and responses to disability-discrimination complaints. One director pointed out the need to build partnerships throughout the campus community by stating, *“Because I am also the ADA Coordinator, it is vital that we create partnerships and shared responsibilities. Faculty and staff have developed more trust in me so they are more willing to share in the accommodation provision. This also allows for continuity across campus (L. Gibson, personal communication, October 20, 2011)”.*

The final director pointed out the need for consistency and a deliberative approach is what makes the department distinct. This movement towards a more consistent approach was driven by many Office of Civil Rights complaints, but the end result is something that has benefitted the students, staff and public served through the department. She defined this benefit by saying, *“If someone in this office says something is going to happen, people now know that it will happen. I tell staff*

*all the time ‘if it isn’t written down, don’t say it...if it isn’t written down, it didn’t happen’. This has created a transparency and consistency in the work we do. (M. Maxey, personal communication, October 21, 2011)”.*

The general findings of this section can be attributed to the operating philosophy of the director of the program. With the exception of two questions, each response was directly correlated to that operating philosophy. While it is apparent that students feel supported by the case-management approach, one can also advocate for the independence model of operation. Within the case-management approach, direct programming for students was the main focus. The efforts of the staff was directed more at developing programming to keep the students engaged within the disability-service department. The push to build a sense of belonging within the department was apparent, but the contribution to the sense of belonging within the campus community as a whole was lacking. In contrast, the philosophy of fostering independence in people with disabilities was focused more on building a sense of belonging within the campus community. This approach made the commitment to disability access a university commitment but the focus on individual student’s need for emotional support was lost. Although the staff of these departments was still seen as strong advocates, the personal nature of the work was not as apparent.

#### Student interviews

To gain an accurate understanding of the elements that promoted students with disabilities probability of staying in college, students were identified by the directors of the programs and asked to take part in a structured interview. Each director identified an upper class student with an apparent disability and an upper class student with an invisible disability. This

distinction was made to identify any different factors between the two populations. Because a framework for discussion is already established in the original interview protocol, each research question will be presented and any identified themes will be discussed.

Interview question S1: What is your initial opinion about why students with disabilities choose to stay in college?

The responses to this open ended question were analyzed and coded into two distinct themes. These themes were evenly distributed among responses and are defined as “resource availability” and “resiliency.” The first theme was characterized solely by the resources available through the disability-services office. One respondent specified the response by stating, *“The resources available in the office for students with disabilities create a natural support system. Students know what is available early on, so they have to work really hard to fail.”* Another student’s response built on the idea of the natural support system by stating, *“School has always been much more difficult for me, but here I am about to graduate. The only reason I have stuck it out has been the disabilities office. They really know what I need and how to get it for me. They make it possible for me to get through.”*

The second theme that emerged from these responses was defined as “resiliency.” Students responded to the question of why they chose to stay in college with conviction about either a need to prove to others or themselves that they could be successful academically. This need to prove themselves has often come out of being treated as if they were less able. For example, one student talked about being compared to his twin brother by stating, *“My twin brother doesn’t have a disability and my parents always compare me to him. He is ahead of me*

*and will graduate before me, but that doesn't mean he is better than me, it just takes me a little longer."*

Another student discussed an educator from her past that told her she would not be able to be successful in college. In this story, the student said, *"My high school principal wanted me to take an occupational diploma. She told me I would not be successful in college because I can't hear. I really want to go back to my high school and show her my degree to prove that people with disabilities can be successful as well."*

Finally, another respondent who had significant physical disabilities went further into this theme by talking about proving to others and himself that despite the need for equipment, personal assistants, and accessible transportation he can persist. He acknowledged that *"despite all the things I have to do to get to campus, get my personal needs met, and get prepared for classes, I will still finish. Even though it is more difficult, I have made it this far...why stop now"?*

The responses to this initial question showed that the combination of resources and resiliency are what helps student with disabilities stay in school. Much of the resiliency was driven by the need to prove themselves and the ability to get their needs met was through the advocacy and support of the disability resource center. While the combination of efforts was discussed, it is notable that the majority of the responses were more aligned with the self-determination and resiliency within each student.

Interview question S2: What experiences do you think are different for you as a college student with a disability?

This question was intended to address the nature of the higher education system and how that experience may be different for people with disabilities. According to Tinto (2003), one of the factors of success for college students is the feeling of integration and involvement. The level of integration for students with disabilities is different than that of the typical student. The responses to this question addressed those differences very clearly. The responses were coded and separated into three themes. These themes are defined as “managing the physical systems,” “managing the traditional learning process,” and “managing perceived attitudinal barriers.”

While all of these differences are inconvenient, the one that caused the most strife in the students was the attitudinal barriers that are still in existence. Several students discussed the need to prove their disability or justify their need for accommodations. This caused undue stress that other students did not need to manage. One student claimed that, *“There are just enough professors who don’t like people with disabilities that some days I question myself about why I do this. The professors who hold the key to my success often are the ones that make my learning environment very unwelcoming.”*

The other two identified themes for this question were the only ones that were defined by the disability types of the respondents. Students with invisible disabilities spoke to the difficulties associated with the traditional learning processes within the college requirements, while the students with apparent disabilities spoke to the difficulties of the physical systems of the campus itself.

The theme of “managing the traditional learning processes” was supported by students reflecting on the time constraints of tests, the impact of pain and fatigue on sitting in classrooms



for multiple hours, and the ability to maintain focus on lectures while also taking adequate notes.

One respondent went further into the explanation by stating,

*“The learning environment at this school is designed for a traditional, able bodied student. Being a student with significant and chronic pain and fatigue makes sitting in a classroom of 100 students for hours at a time very difficult for me. Sometimes I have to focus more on sitting through my pain than on the material being addressed in the lecture.”*

Another student talked about the specifics of the time allotted for learning material. She went on to say,

*“My learning curve is very different. It takes me much longer so I have to plan well in advance for myself. I know that I have to put in twice as much time to complete assignments and tests, but as long as I know where to get the assistance I need [at the disability-service office], nothing really will be different.”*

Finally, the theme of “managing the physical systems” was supported by responses regarding the needed equipment, the planning process of managing physical accommodations, transportation issues, and the physical accessibility of classrooms and bathrooms. One student defined his day on his campus by saying, *“I have to first think about setting up my transportation to campus and hope that the driver isn’t late, then I have to make sure I have enough time to get from one building to the accessible restroom to meet my personal care assistant, then get to my next class without being late.”* This same student went on to say, *“I also hope every day that someone hasn’t blocked the accessible path with a bike or golf cart. Sometimes, just getting to class is an achievement.”*

Another student addressed the need for being less spontaneous than typical college students. She supported this statement by saying,

*“I have to get my accommodations set up months ahead of time. If I skip class like other students, my interpreter still gets paid for the whole class time. If I want to go to a club meeting, I have to set up an interpreter weeks in advance, if professors show videos, I have to have them captioned so I can be an active part of class. I just have to think about things way in advance.”*

The last respondent in this theme concentrated on the need for technology to make learning possible. He went into further detail by stating,

*“Vocational Rehabilitation and disability services have provided all the technology support I need to take notes, record lectures, write papers, and take exams. Without all this equipment and technology, I wouldn’t be able to pass my classes.”*

Interview question S3: Do you feel like you “belong” at your university? Explain why or why not.

According to The American Council on Education (2005), one of the primary ways of promoting student retention is creating a sense of social integration, which can be defined as the level of connection between an individual student and the social system of the college (p. 109). This sense of social integration has also been referred to as a sense of belonging within the college campus (Tinto, 2003). This vital piece of student development is a need that must be met for students with disabilities as well.

The responses to this question were primarily positive with only one respondent giving a negative response. This student said she did not feel that she belonged anywhere on campus, but when this researcher asked for details, the reply was focused on being a non-traditional student. As follow up information to this question she said, *“As a non-traditional student I have always felt isolated. Having a disability just makes it worse.”*

The remaining respondents affirmed that they felt like they had a sense of belonging at the university, but that sense of belonging was separated into two themes. These themes were differentiated by where they felt they belonged. The majority of the responses fell under the theme “belong in disability services.” Students who responded this way made statements such as, *“I have a great support system in disability services. They don’t judge me when I am struggling,”* and *“The disabilities office has been my main support. I would never have made it without them.”*

One student went further with her explanation by stating, *“I transferred here from another school because I didn’t feel like I had a place at the disability-services office. I don’t feel like I belong as a part of the university, but I feel like I have a home in the Office for Students with Disabilities.”*

The final theme in these responses can be defined as “leadership and advocacy roles.” The students who responded according to this theme focused more on feeling like they belonged in the campus community as a whole. These respondents both noted taking active leadership roles within student organizations and being a disability advocate throughout campus. One student responded by stating, *“I am very involved in a lot of organizations on campus. I think it is so important for people with disabilities to show others what we are capable of. We won’t be recognized as leaders unless we start acting like leaders.”* Another student discussed her leadership roles on campus by stating, *“I have been very involved with my sorority since my freshman year. People can’t see my disability, but they know the effects and since taking on a leadership role, I have been able to advocate more for people with disabilities within the Greek system.”*

It is notable that the students with responses that fell within the theme defined as “belong in disability services” were the student representatives from the universities that adopted a case-management philosophy of disability support. The students with responses that fell within the theme defined as “leadership and advocacy roles” were the student representatives from the universities that adopted an independence philosophy of disability support.

Interview question S4: Who has been your main support system  
since coming to college?

The primary purpose for this question was to establish the main source of support for students with disabilities. Most students who are successful in college have some level of support through either the school or their family units. This question was to define whether the level of support was different or similar to students without disabilities.

The responses for this question fell into three distinct themes. These themes were defined as family support, academic support, and economic support. The responses from students with apparent disabilities and invisible disabilities were equally distributed among themes.

Theme one addressed the support system built within the family unit of the student. Parents of students with disabilities are trained through the Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade school system to be the advocates that the students need. Parents know their rights within that system and have been the main source for advocacy for their students until they transition to college. This fact was addressed in several responses. One student recalled her mother advocating for her in school by stating,

*“My mom has always been my biggest support system. My parents are divorced so she had to work really hard, but she never missed a meeting at school and didn’t let the teachers get away with anything. It is different now, but she still gives me the strength I need to get through the hard things.”*

Another student talked about his family by saying, *“My family is the main thing that keeps me going. They were always there for me through surgeries and hospital stays. They still are there with me every day when I feel like giving up at school. They don’t let me quit.”*

Theme two focused on the academic support offered through the college itself. There is a notable difference among college students with disabilities that separates them from college students without disabilities. Students who do not have disabilities tend to lean on academic

departmental advisors for support. Student with disabilities defined the disability-services office as the main area for academic support. Two respondents recognized a mentor faculty member as someone they could ask specific major related questions to, but the majority of the academic support came from disability services. One student said this about disability services, *“The Office of Disability Services is my biggest support. I would never have made it through without them. There is no obstacle they couldn’t overcome and they helped me with anything I needed.”* Another student recognized the understanding of disability services in this way, *“Disability services has been my emotional support all the way through. They offer me support in regards to my emotional needs and understand the impact of my disability in regards to identifying my accommodations.”* A final student gave this message, *“Disability Services was my life line. It was crucial for me to be able to go to someone that truly understood what I needed. Without that, I probably would have left a long time ago.”*

The final theme within this research question is what truly sets college students with disabilities aside from all other students. This idea of financial support is very different for people with disabilities. While the typical college student may receive financial support through scholarships, college students with disabilities often have another layer of support offered through the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. This department offers financial support to college students with disabilities that depends on the level of qualifying disability. The disabilities that have more of an impact qualify students for more financial support. To address this additional level of support, one student said, *“Vocational Rehabilitation has been my main source of financial support. They pay for everything including tuition, books, supplies, art equipment. I mean everything.”* Another student went on to say, *“Vocational Rehabilitation has worked really well with the disability-services office. They pay for all my tuition and fees. When*

*there were questions about my course load, disability services clarified everything for them. It was truly a great partnership.”* A final student addressed another form of support in the LIFE scholarship. She explained it in this way,

*“I qualified for Vocational Rehabilitation but I also received the LIFE Scholarship for students with a 3.5 GPA or higher. Because I received this scholarship, they didn’t have any tuition to pay, so they help me with my high medical costs. With costs for medication exceeding \$5000 per month, this allows me to go to school instead of working full time to pay for my medicine.”*

These responses demonstrate the varying need and availability of support for this population. While typical college students depend on family, academic departments and financial resources as well, the support available for students with disabilities is different. Family members for both groups offer support, but the family members of students with disabilities serve in the role of strong advocates and legal representation as well. This difference is prevalent in the K-12 system of education, and the need to advocate strongly often carries into the higher education system. Academic departments serve as support for both groups, but students with disabilities depend more on disability services than academic departments to offer academic support. Finally, both groups tend to rely on some form of financial support, but students with disabilities have much more support available through the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. This information supports the idea that while students with disabilities have many more obstacles to overcome, they also have a much stronger and integrated support system available to them. When the student qualifies for these services, and all the systems are in place, the student can benefit from the tremendous support. Ultimately, however, it is the student who is accountable for maintaining accountability and communication with these agencies.

Interview question S5: How have you been involved with your college social system?

The intention of this question was to examine whether the level of involvement in the college social system had any impact on the retention of college students with disabilities (Tinto, Goodsell & Russo, 1994). While developing a sense of belonging is vital to the building of community, the place of belonging is varied among populations. The responses to this question could be divided into three themes according to where the respondents were involved. The majority of the responses defined their social involvement by the time spent with the disability-services office. The secondary group of responses identified only academic departmental involvement as the social outlet. Only one person identified any involvement with a truly social group on campus.

Within the theme of disability-service department involvement, the respondents discussed a level of reciprocity with the office. Many students discussed giving back to the office by serving as a tutor or volunteer. Of these respondents, many also alluded to the lack of social involvement because he or she felt uncomfortable and unaccepted in areas other than disability services. One student went as far as saying, *“I did an interview with the paper once and pointed out the complete lack of involvement of people with disabilities involved in the Greek system, Homecoming, SGA, etc. due to the lack of acceptance of people with apparent disabilities.”*

The level of involvement defined by the academic department was made up of responses from four different students, all of whom had invisible disabilities. This is notable because the responses were surrounding the amount of time students had to put into studying to be successful. One student pointed out, *“Because I have to study much longer than most students to get the same amount of work completed, I only have so much time to dedicate to anything social. The time I choose to spend on social activities is also very focused on academics because that is*

*where I get support.”* Another student identified spending time with an academic mentor as the only time she spends on anything social at the university. She went on to say, *“I have been published four times, I am a McNair Scholar, and I have a mentor in my department, but the only way I have been this successful is to study my butt off.”* The majority of the students that responded in this way pointed out that social groups have minimum time requirements that they were not able to comply with because of the need for increased time dedicated to academic work.

The final response that was truly associated with a social group on the campus was that of a student with an invisible disability. This student discussed her involvement with her sorority over the past four years and the leadership role she has taken recently. She went further into the response by stating,

*“I have been a part of many student organizations, but the one that I have dedicated the most time to is my sorority. I have had many opportunities for leadership development and have recently taken on a leadership role. I think this opportunity has given me the best support that will last much longer than my time at college.”*

These responses speak volumes to where students with disabilities feel accepted. Only one respondent addressed any involvement with any group that was truly social. Every other response was either directly related to disability services or tied directly to academics. While many students recognized a desire to be involved socially, the majority either didn’t have time, didn’t have the confidence, or didn’t know how to become involved.

Interview question S6: What supports outside of the disability-services office  
have you used?

This question was developed to address the various areas of support that students with disabilities utilize. There is an abundance of support offered to the entire student population on



any given college campus, but it is unclear whether students with disabilities take advantage of these support systems. This question helped address this uncertainty.

The responses to this question were very diverse but represented the support services available to the student population as a whole. The responses fell into three themes with only one outlier. The themes were identified as academic support, student support programs, and general campus support. The outlier was a single respondent that said the following, *“The only department that understands everything I need is the disability-service program. They can provide everything so why would I need to go anywhere else.”* It is notable that this response came from a student in a department that employs a case-management approach to services.

Within the academic support theme, students shared the use of various tutoring programs, math labs, writing labs, and professor mentoring. Many students discussed general tutoring through the academic departments as well as using study groups in which they could use their own strengths to help others. The need for giving back was prevalent in these responses. One student stated, *“I have recently begun tutoring in writing. I am really good at writing and want to help others. I know that so many people have helped me through, so it is my turn to help others.”* Another student shared the experience of having a faculty mentor. She talked about her in this way,

*“Because I do well academically, I have many professors willing to help me, but I have one in particular that I would call a mentor. She understands that I have difficulties that others don’t really see, but she also sees that I can be very successful. She not only helps me through the academic material, but also helps me figure out how to manage when I just get exhausted.”*

The student support program theme addresses the various programs outside of academic affairs. These programs could include, but are not limited to; TRIO, Student Support Services, Counseling, etc. These services are also available to all students with or without disabilities. One student pointed out the support offered through Student Support Services while another

discussed the tutoring offered through TRIO. Both of these grant funded departments are also open to students without disabilities, but focuses primarily on first generation college students.

The final theme of general campus support is comprised of responses regarding support that does not fall into the academic affairs or student development division within the campus. These departments could include, but are not limited to; health services, institutional technology department (ITD), campus bookstore, financial aid, etc. Students who offered responses under this theme addressed the way the departments met their needs regarding the impact of their disabilities as well. One student discussed health services by saying, *“I have to renew my ADHD medication every month or I will completely lose focus in my classes. I am able to go to Health Services and get this done instead of going home every month to see my doctor.”* Another student discussed the impact of her disability on her use of technology by talking about her interactions with ITD. She stated, *“To be able to keep up with my reading and stay organized, and I have a few specific software programs installed on my laptop. To get this on my laptop, I had to take it to the tech department to get through all the firewalls. They were very helpful and rushed it.”*

The majority of these responses validate that students with disabilities are not only depending on the support through the disability-services office, but they are making use of the other support services offered to the campus population as a whole. Students with needs outside the normal college student must take responsibility for finding the needed support. By making use of all that is available, the potential for academic success can only increase.

Interview question S7: How did you find out about the services available?

The purpose of this question was to examine how students with disabilities found out about support services. In particular, this researcher wanted to examine if the students were directed to the services through the disability-services office.

The responses to this question were separated into two distinct themes. These themes are defined as independent research and the case management through disability services. Although many of the previous responses to questions were aligned with the philosophy of the represented disability-services offices, this question was not aligned in that same way. The majority of the responses pointed directly at independently researching what was available at the corresponding campus. The majority of the students responded that they were able to identify the support available on campus through the announcements during the first couple of days of all classes as well as statements on the syllabus in each class. One student went further by saying, *“I took notes on all the departments that offered support, and then I went to visit the directors of each. If I felt like they could help me, I kept going back. If I felt like it was something I didn’t need, I didn’t return.”*

A student from another campus took the idea of independent research further by discussing her process prior to coming to college. She said,

*“I researched every department on campus that offered support. I called them and asked lots of questions, I mean a lot of questions. Then I popped in for a visit and decided if I felt like they understood that I just wanted the same type of support as other student. Some of them didn’t, but most did. Those are the programs I still use today and refer people to all the time.”*

Of all the responses to this question, only two were directly related to the theme of case management by disability services. Each of these students discussed the process of going to disability services and requesting support. The director at each of these departments made phone calls for the students and set up the subsequent appointments. One student said, *“I came to*

*disability services because I was really worried about my grade in my math class. They set up a time for me to go to the math department and meet with a tutor.” Another student said, “I found out about all of the different things through disability services, but I only went to the ones I thought I needed.”*

It is apparent through these responses that the commitment to the support increases with the independence of locating the services. When the students went through the work to identify the services he or she needed, the follow through was much more likely. Students, who were able to identify their own needs, locate the services on campus, and follow through with those services were represented at a much higher rate than those who needed disability services to find the support for them.

Interview question S8: What has been the most helpful part about being registered with the disability-services office?

As the responses to this question were analyzed, three distinct responses emerged consistently. These responses were coded into the themes of accommodations, advocacy and belonging. Each of these replies was discussed by respondents as vital to their success, but when pressed to identify one most important factor, the responses were focused primarily on having a place where they belonged. The second most identified response was the advocacy of the disability-service office. The least represented responses were the two that were directly related to testing accommodations.

It is notable that the majority of the respondents talked about the need to have a place where they felt welcome and understood. Six interviewees responded that this is the most

important aspect that helped in the successful matriculation through college. One student went into this in more detail by stating,

*“Having a disability makes things much more difficult. Whether people can see that I have a disability or not, I do have one and that makes things really difficult for me. The disability-services office just gives me the extra support and understanding I need. They make it less of an uphill battle. They take away the threat.”*

Another student went further into the need for a place to feel welcome by saying, *“This is a place where I can go get pissed off, cry, or just be alone in my thoughts. This is the only place where a student like me with real issues is just completely welcome as I am. Good days and bad days.”*

The secondary theme is one that represents the need for advocacy. Advocacy is defined as an active support for a cause, position, or group of people (Dictionary.com, 2012). This level of support is vital when representing any minority group on a college campus. Advocacy is a show of support that exceeds what is required by law but does not necessarily go to the same lengths as creating a sense of belonging or community. Three of the interviewees responded that this was the most important thing to them. Two female students discussed particular issues in which a professor was treating her unfairly and the disability-services offices advocated for her fair treatment. One student discussed the unfair treatment by stating,

*“There was a particular professor who didn’t want me in his class because of the accommodations I needed. He was trying really hard to push me out of the class and the program in general. Disability services stepped in and advocated for me so I didn’t have to take on the fight alone. It made it much easier and I stayed in school because I was no longer alone.”*

The final theme only had representation of one participant. That interviewee discussed the benefit of two separate accommodations. These included the testing accommodations as well as priority registration. This student went further into detail by stating,

*“The most helpful thing has been the priority registration. This allows me register for my classes early so I can manage my course load and get with faculty members that will work well with me. The testing accommodations are also really helpful. By taking the away the pressure of the ticking clock and watching other people finish before me, I feel like I can really just take my test and not worry about everything else.”*

Interview question S9: Which services do you find most useful through the disability-services office?

The purpose of this question was to focus more on the accommodations that were the most beneficial, but the answers were the same as the previous question. Because the answers were redundant, the discussion would also be redundant. The responses to this question are stricken from the responses with no effect on the overall outcome of the research project.

Interview question S10: How have you experienced being treated fairly/unfairly on your college campus?

This question was designed to examine how students with disabilities view fair and unfair treatment. The way a person in power, such as a faculty member, treats a student has a lasting impact. People with disabilities have historically been treated unfairly through lowered expectations, denial of accommodations, and attitudinal barriers (Smart, 2001). This researcher was interested in looking at the impact of that treatment on students with disabilities.

The responses to this question can be divided into two distinct conversations; the responses to being treated fairly and the responses to being treated unfairly. The responses to being treated fairly all fell within one theme that can be described as universal equity. This speaks volumes to how students with disabilities view the idea of fair. The responses all alluded to being treated like every other student with the same level of expectations. One student expanded on this idea by saying, *“I don’t think I have ever been treated differently. I have the*

*same expectation on me. I use accommodations, but I still have to do the same work. That seems fair to me. I don't ever want to be treated differently."* Another student discussed a student organization treating him fairly by saying, *"I am in a student organization that takes trips off campus. The president arranged for a van with a lift on it so I could participate. It wasn't like I was singled out or overcompensated. The whole group rode in the same van as I did."*

The responses to being treated unfairly were very broad. They ranged from having no access to being afraid of mistreatment. For the purposes of adequately addressing each response, three themes have been identified. These themes can be defined as follows: Fear of retribution, lack of access, and the requirement to prove a disability.

The majority of the responses to this question fell within the theme defined as "fear of retribution." Interviewees expressed concern over how they would be treated if they advocated for themselves when they were treated unfairly. Because faculty members at universities have control over a student's grade, it is challenging for a student to decide if he or she wants to pursue advocating for themselves. One student expanded on this by saying,

*"I had a history professor who would not let me use my testing accommodations. He thought it was unfair for me to get more time on an exam than anyone else. I was really afraid to talk to him and even more afraid to have disability services talk to him because I didn't want it to affect my grade. History is my major and I knew I would have to take more classes with him."*

This idea of retribution can be expanded to include professors sharing disability information about students with other professors. This sharing of confidential information can result in professors prejudging students about their disability accommodations before the first day of class. This happened to a student who had previously advocated for herself to a professor, then experienced unfair treatment due to this with other professors in the subsequent semester. He went further into detail by stating,

*“I now hope that professors won’t remember that I asked for accommodations because I saw what happens when they talk about my disability. I went to another class in the same department the semester after I had a problem with a faculty member. My professor called me to the front after class and told me that he expected me to not have any problems with him and he would not tolerate the disrespect I apparently showed the faculty member last semester. In fact, he said he didn’t care that I had a disability; he would not allow me to use accommodations. Now I worry that every time I ask for accommodations, people will talk about me after I leave.”*

The responses that fell within the lack of access theme addressed two of the most basic levels of access on a college campus; physical access and communication access. One student discussed several occasions when she could not get into the building to get to class. Among those was this comment,

*“My sophomore year I was trying to get to my first day of Geology Lab. I had a difficult time getting into the building because there was no automatic door opener. Once someone opened the door for me, I found the lab but had a difficult time getting in because there were so many tables and not enough room for my wheelchair to maneuver. Then once I found a path to get to a station, the table was too high and I couldn’t reach anything. When class was over, I left in tears, dropped the class. I almost quit school that day.”*

Another student discussed lack of physical access to a building in a different way. He remembers a situation this way,

*“We have a beautiful campus that takes a lot of work by the landscaping crew to keep clean. They drive these big golf carts with their equipment on them to do their work all across campus. Unfortunately, they tend to park them wherever they can find a spot. There have been quite a few times when the crew has parked their carts on the curb cut so I can’t get on the sidewalk to get to the building. I just have to wait there until someone comes back to move it. I know people have asked them not to park near the curb cuts, but they still do. It just isn’t that important to them.”*

To address the idea of communication access, one student mentioned an experience in her Anthropology class. She said,

*“Some professors just don’t understand how to work with deaf students. I was in class and the professor started a video that didn’t have captions. That was a complete waste of time for me because I didn’t get any of the information. I asked her after class for the video to have captions on them and she just told me to sit up front when we watch videos. She didn’t understand that it doesn’t matter where I sit, I won’t be able to hear the video. I struggled with her for three months to finally start getting captions on the videos. I was still tested over that*



*information, so my grade was low on those tests. I don't think she ever really understood why I was asking for all the videos to be captioned."*

The responses that fell under the final theme of needing to prove a disability was not as large in number, but still significant. This idea of proving a disability is prevalent for many people that have invisible disabilities. This is something this researcher experiences each semester. Students with invisible disabilities are often expected to prove they have a disability or they are simply seen as lazy or irresponsible. The phrases "If he just tried harder..." or "If she studied more..." is something that is heard by this population frequently. In the experience of working with this population of students, it is more likely that they work harder and study more than the typical college student. One student expressed this experience very clearly by stating,

*"I have had professors talk to me like I am trying to get one over on the system or trying to get someone to feel sorry for me. I actually had one professor in my major department tell me there was nothing about me that looked sick or ailing. She actually used those words. She tried to disregard my accommodation requests and I had to talk to her over and over about the impact of my learning disability. In the end, she wasn't happy about it, but she did let me have my extended time on my tests."*

Interview question S11: If you had to choose one thing that has made you stay in college, what would that one thing be?

The purpose of this research question was to examine any closing thoughts about what contributes to the decision for college students to stay in school. After participants were able to examine their history at the school, both positive and negative, this question offers a sense of closure on the research. The responses were distributed into three distinct themes; resiliency, motivation, and support systems.

Resiliency is defined as the ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity, or the like (Dictionary.com, 2012). This idea is prevalent in all the responses to this question, but there were three students that focused entirely on this idea of resiliency as their one factor that

encouraged them to stay in school. One student simply said, *“I’m resilient. It is the only thing that has kept me alive this long.”*

This same idea was shared among many respondents whether they had an apparent disability or an invisible disability. A student with significant and chronic health issues that are invisible to the majority of people went into further detail about the idea of resiliency. He said,

*“I have had over 70 brain surgeries and almost died several times. Every day I have to work harder, study longer, and have more patience with myself than my peers. I have a lot of personal satisfaction that I am still alive when my doctors didn’t think I would live past 10 years old. Many people told me that I can’t, but I did. Going through everything that I have gone through has made me much stronger. If I can make through all of this stuff, college is nothing.”*

The second set of responses was defined by the theme of motivation. These students had found something that made them want to push through all the adversity to make it to their goal of graduation. For some of them the motivating factor was that someone in high school told them they would not be able to make it in college, for others it was to reach a lifelong goal. Whatever the factor, this motivation was a strong force in their ability to maintain their focus on graduating. One respondent who has substantial physical disabilities referred to school as the thing that keeps him *“among the living.”* Another student discussed her motivating factor by stating, *“I really struggled all through school, but I have found what I am passionate about. I have another chance so why wouldn’t I see it through.”* Finally, another respondent talked about discovering her life goal while she was in college by saying,

*“I really didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life, but I have loved the assistance I received through the disability services office. I loved it so much that I decided that is what I want to do with my life. Now I am so motivated to finish so I can start doing this great work full time.”*

The final theme, which was defined as support systems, had the most responses. The responses were not about the technology available or the accommodations in the classroom. No students mentioned testing accommodations or sign language interpreters. Instead, they all

focused on the advocacy offered through the disability support offices. Whether it was the fact that there were people that understood the difficulties associated with disabilities in higher education, or that there were people that would stand up for equal access on campus, the messages within this response group was clear. The support of the staff in the disabilities-services office was the primary reason why they stayed in college.

One student talked about this support by saying, *“I found people that really understand me and my disability. They helped me understand myself and my own needs so I can start to advocate better for myself as well. They just really get it.”* Another student simply said, *“Every time I wanted to give up, the staff of the disabilities-service office just told me to keep going another day and not give up yet. I felt like they saw something in me that I didn’t see in myself. That kept me going.”* Finally, a student explained an emotional event that summed up her relationship with the disabilities office by sharing,

*“I get really low on emotional energy sometimes. I can only take so much negativity from people, but all I get is positive things from the disabilities office. There was a time when I physically got stuck in a door on campus. My wheelchair fit halfway through but I couldn’t make it all the way, then I couldn’t back out either. I was just stuck. That was one of the most humiliating things I have experienced. Students were lining up on both sides just staring at me, but not one person offered to help. I called the director and she was down at the door with me within minutes. She pushed and pulled until I made it back out of the doorway. I was emotionally crushed, so she pushed me back to the office and sat with me while I cried. They just create a place where it is safe to just be myself without excuses or explanations. They give me energy when I can’t do it on my own.”*

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS**

In our recent history, there has been a significant increase in the study of the retention rates of students in post-secondary institutions. The focus on recruiting students to college at a high rate has shifted to retaining the students that are already enrolled. State legislation such as The Complete College Tennessee Act (THEC, 2013), is changing the focus of higher education from enrollment to outcomes. New funding formulas are tied to the number of students graduating from Tennessee colleges. New programs and departments are being developed on college campuses to increase the retention rates of students as a whole. Retention rates are frequently gathered and reported for female students, international students, non-traditional students, and other minority students (Watson, Redd & Perna, 2003), but students with disabilities are typically not included in those studies as an identified minority group.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and the subsequent Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (2008) are the guiding documents that lead the work of disability service professionals in higher education. These are civil rights laws that require colleges and universities to provide accommodations to qualified students with disabilities so they have equal access to educational, social, athletic, and cultural programming hosted by the university. The laws, however, do not guarantee any level of success for students with disabilities. This may be the reason for the lack of retention studies among this population. In fact, a leading professional in the field of disability services responded to a query about this subject by saying, “Students

with disabilities are students first and should not be culled out just because they also have a disability. We can provide every textbook in braille but we can't make students read them, we can grant extended time on every test, but we can't make students study for them" (G. Peters, personal communication, May 23, 2013).

The literature on the topic of retention theories in higher education is vast. Many retention models have been developed throughout history, but the five models used for reference in this study and reviewed in the literature are the economic model, which focuses on the cost of higher education and how it may benefit a college graduate. Need based financial aid grew out of this model. The organizational model, which is closely tied to the organizational structure of business and focuses on student departure much like employee turnover. Six independent variables related to student departure were identified in this model and programming in universities was developed around each of those variables. Student Government Associations grew out of this model. The psychological model which asserts that people have pre-identified psychological attributes that have been developed and supported by parents, siblings, educational professionals, etc. Students enter college with these attributes but they can be challenged or supported through college personnel. First year studies programs have developed out of this model. The sociological model which places the emphasis on the social nature of college students and focuses on the need for student involvement in the campus social structure. The need for faculty mentorship developed directly out of this model. Tinto's Theory of Integration (interactional model) (1975) is the model that is most widely recognized and it is focused on the student's sense of belonging in the campus community. This theory ties the previous models together and examines holistic needs of each student.

Using these models of retention as a basis for developing this exploratory study, factors such as geographic location, student population and campus size were examined through the demographic analysis of college campuses from the southeast region of the United States. To further examine the contribution to the retention of students with disabilities, an interview protocol was developed to address the philosophy and make up of disability service departments on those same campuses. Finally, with the previous models of retention in mind, an interview protocol was developed to gather information from upper-level college students with disabilities to examine what made them stay in college. Using a case study design, all factors were combined to establish a set of features that increased the likelihood of college students with disabilities to graduate from their university.

Through the information gathered from all three perspectives, data were analyzed and themes emerged. Interesting perspectives developed from each method. For example, through the demographic information, it became apparent that students with disabilities no longer choose which university to attend based on the accessibility of the transportation system and geographic location of the university because all universities have the same requirements for access.

Through the disability service provider interviews, two distinct models for disability service emerged. This researcher defined these models as the case management model and the independence model. Both models have merits and drawbacks but which model is better for student retention was not made clear based on the results of this study. Finally, through the student interviews the true experiences of college students with disabilities were examined. The series of interview questions helped identify what made these students stay in college although the experience is significantly different and often times, much more difficult than their non-disabled peers. These identified reasons tied directly back to the outlined retention theories. The

three significant themes for why students with disabilities stay in college were identified as follows; a sense of belonging, which is identified in both the organizational and sociological theory of retention as well as theory of integration; resource availability, which is identified within the economic theory of retention, and resiliency/motivation, which is identified within the psychological theory of retention.

In reviewing the results presented in the previous chapter, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the elements that have the most impact on the retention of college students with disabilities. These conclusions could have significant impact on how disability-service providers do their work on college campuses. These conclusions and recommendations will be discussed according to the three different sections previously outlined: campus demographics, the disability-service director's response, and responses from students with disabilities.

The first section discussed was the campus demographics. After analyzing this information, it is apparent that the location of a college campus has little to do with the decision for students with disabilities to attend. Prior to this study, there had been discussions among professionals in the disability field (AHEAD, 2011) that students with disabilities choose colleges in more urban areas due to transportation and availability of resources. According to this study, the location had little impact on the population of students with disabilities.

Of the schools visited, two were urban, metropolitan universities and two were more rural in nature. University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB) and College of Charleston (COC) both are located in urban settings. Both are located in the heart of the downtown area with easy access to public transportation, vocational rehabilitation offices, public libraries, restaurants, etc. These campuses were very similar in appearance and size, but the population of students with disabilities was very different. The population of students with disabilities at UAB is

approximately 400 which is equal to 2% of the total student population, while the population of students with disabilities at COC is 785 students which is 7% of the total student population. The same disparity was noted for the rural colleges. Eastern Tennessee State University (ETSU) and Appalachian State University (ASU) are both located outside of the city and in more rural areas. The access to public transportation to the campus is more limited and the campus is more isolated. Again, these colleges are very similar in size and location is comparison to the city center, but the population of students with disabilities was not similar. The population of students with disabilities at ETSU is just over 800 students which is 6% of the total student population while the population of students with disabilities at ASU is closer to 500 students, or 3% of the total student population.

This information tells us that students are choosing universities based less on the location and access to public resources and more on their primary school of choice. This is an encouraging piece of information as it supports the push for inclusion of people with disabilities and advocates that college students with disabilities should be able to choose any college they want to attend, based more on their academic and social interest and less on the level of access to the institution.

The information that was most unexpected during this project is that none of the schools researched or tracked the retention of college students with disabilities. There is a heightened focus on retention and graduation in higher education, which is tied directly to the funding of the university. The retention rates of students are tracked according to many identifying factors, and this information is published through the institution, but none of the institutions studied in this research, looked at the retention of students with disabilities. Such information can be helpful in identifying which programs are contributing well to the retention of students with disabilities and



how these programs are structured. Because the federal guidelines are so vague, this information can help solidify how disability-service providers should be doing their work.

The second section discussed was disability-service director interviews. This aspect of the study examined how the directors viewed their work and their relationship to the college campus as a whole. Two very different approaches emerged. One is a case-management approach while the other is an independence-building approach. The most interesting part of this information is that the two schools that took on the independence approach recently went through an organizational shift. This shift placed the responsibility of all disability accommodations for students, faculty, staff, and public solely with the disability-service office. This move forced them to take a more universal approach due to resource limitation and the exposure to campus colleagues. The effect that this move had on the institutions was powerful. Because there was one place on campus to go to for all disability related needs, the perceived power of this department was elevated. The directors were seen as experts and this generated an increase in respect for the department. This respect then elevated the campus to have a culture shift as well, which propelled disability access to the forefront of planning for the entire university instead of reacting to situations individually. Unfortunately, the added duties to these programs stretched their already thin set of fiscal and human resources, so the personal bond they had with their students diminished.

The directors that took a more case-management approach discussed being able to support the emotional needs of the students that sought services from their offices. This allowed the program to build a community and helped students have a greater sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is vital to the success of any college student, so this approach is also highly valuable. The case-management style allowed students to go to one person to get questions

answered, tasks accomplished, and receive advocacy support, which made adjusting to life on a college campus more manageable; however, this approach also separated students with disabilities from the rest of the college campus. While typical students made use of the various support services on campus, the students in these offices, tended to only go to the disabilities office to get their tasks accomplished. This approach could inadvertently create “learned helplessness” (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978) among the students.

It is clear that both approaches have their own strengths and weaknesses. It would be most beneficial for disability-service offices to create a system that blends both approaches. Disability-service offices should be able to support and advocate for students while still encouraging independence and inclusion within the entire campus community. Basic service delivery models allow for the provision of the required academic accommodations, but the way the service model is designed will potentially have an impact on the relationships between students and provider, as well as a potential impact on where the student’s sense of belonging lies.

The final piece of information that developed out of the second section of this study was identification of the most widely used accommodations. Among all schools, the number one accommodation used was that of extending testing time and of testing in a distraction-reduced setting. This is not a surprise because students with any type of disability can be supported with this accommodation, and it is one of the easiest to manage in a disability-service office. The second-most-used accommodation among the schools researched was defined as advocacy. In the traditional view of accommodations, this would not be identified as an accommodation, but according to the participants in this study, this is one of the most needed forms of support. This could be due to the changing federal regulations, the culture shifts among college professionals,

or the sophistication of college students with disabilities. Despite the reason for this change, it is becoming clear that disability-service providers have a new and challenging duty; that of conflict mediation.

Section three addressed the data gathered from student interviews. The information gathered through these students' interviews allows true access to the experiences of college students with disabilities. Through these interviews, all the data gathered, and the coding of the information, three major themes emerged to answer the research question for this study. It is notable that the three identified themes fall within the earlier identified theories of retention discussed in the theoretical framework: psychological (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005), sociological (Astin, 1984), economic (Braxton, 2003), organizational (Bean, 1980), and integration (Tinto, 1975). In combining all the information gathered, the reasons why upper-level college students with disabilities have stayed in college are as follows: A sense of belonging, which is identified in both the organizational and sociological theory of retention as well as theory of integration; resource availability, which is identified within the economic, organizational and integration theory of retention, and resiliency/motivation, which is identified within the psychological theory of retention.

### Sense of belonging

Whether the student expressed a sense of community within the disability-service office that employed a case-management approach, or a sense of community within the campus itself in the independence approach, this was the primary reason expressed by a majority of the students interviewed. Tinto (2003) expressed this need to build a sense of belonging within the college social structure as a way to help college students successfully complete their degree. It is evident

that this is also true for the population of students with disabilities. Whether it was a need to be understood, supported, or listened to, the students expressed these needs being met through their college community. One student expressed this notion very clearly by saying, *“Being here is the first time I have ever felt like I really belong.”*

### Resource availability

The amount of resources available to students with disabilities in higher education is vital to the retention of this population. One of the primary areas in focus for students was the financial support offered through The Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. This department offers financial support for tuition, books, supplies, and housing for students with disabilities, but they also have a set of strict guidelines for keeping that support. Students must maintain a full course load and a minimum grade-point average to continue with the support. Because this department is paying for students’ schooling, many of those students feel an obligation to do well and finish their education. Additional resources discussed were the accommodations and advocacy offered through disability-service office. Whether it is a simple testing accommodation or advocacy during a difficult situation, students expressed sincere gratitude for having these things available for them at any time.

### Resiliency and motivation

The most powerful of all themes that emerged was this theme of resiliency. Students openly discussed the difficulties experienced in life. Whether it was multiple surgeries, or being treated unfairly due to a disability, each student saw these obstacles as opportunities for growth. Things that would push a typical college student away from college were seen as minor bumps in

the road to students with disabilities. These students are required to be proactive in their approach to college. They must plan ahead for transportation, plan their schedules purposefully to navigate the physical routes of campus, schedule sign-language interpreters months ahead of time, plan for classroom accommodations prior to the semester beginning. When this much work and effort is put into education, there seems to be a greater commitment and follow through. Students with disabilities put in a lot of extra work to do what the typical college student does with ease.

#### Recommendations for practice

The information gathered from this study presents evidence to the field of higher education and disabilities regarding the association of personal qualities, program development, and resource allocation to the retention of college students with disabilities. Through a balance of these three approaches, it is possible to increase the likelihood that college students with disabilities will persevere through their college career and earn a degree. The following recommendations support how disability support offices can structure the interaction with students based on the student's personal qualities (background), develop the philosophy of the disability support programs at post-secondary institutions of higher education, and develop a responsible and effective structure for resource allocation.

#### Personal qualities (background)

The qualities of students with disabilities that make it more likely that they will continue their education through graduation are inherent in their personalities. (Thoma & Getzel, 2005)

As discussed by the students in this study, these personal qualities, such as resiliency and

motivation, can be either internal or external. Students that have disabilities have learned to be resilient and give up less easily than the typical college student. As presented through this study, interviews describe students who have faced significant obstacles in their lives but often see the normal challenges of college life more manageable. Students who have faced discrimination due to disabilities have developed a stronger emotional self that is related more to their own expectations and less dependent on what others think of them. In addition, this resiliency has allowed them to develop more self-determination to advocate and educate about the impact of their specific disability.

Conversely, the external impact of people doubting them during their developmental phases as a student, contributes to the motivation to be successful. Where the typical college student is motivated to finish college out of a desire to be financially independent, or have a secure base of funding for themselves and their future families, students with disabilities often feel motivated to finish college to prove their doubters wrong. The motivation driven from the desire to prove their worth is often stronger than the motivation to make money.

This information can help disability-service offices tailor how they approach students with disabilities. The students with disabilities in this study have had lowered expectations and excel in spite of that. By placing the same level of expectations on students with disabilities, they will potentially be more motivated to excel. This approach is not a typical experience for students with disabilities, so the motivating factor could be tremendous.

### Program development

Every public university in the country is required to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified students with disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act, 2009).

How these accommodations are provided determines the impact on student retention. Through this research, two distinct forms of service provisions were identified. The case-management approach is an approach that increases the dependence on the disabilities office, but allows for students to feel a high level of emotional and academic support. This approach encourages a sense of dependence and encourages a strong relationship between the student and provider. The other form of service provision is one in which the disabilities office fosters a true sense of independence within the student. This approach encourages the growth of the internal resiliency and motivation in students, but may not encourage them to rely on external forces as much. According to one director who uses this approach (M.Maxey, personal communication, October 24, 2012), students become more fully involved with their campus community and develop a sense of independence as a college student. The relationships are built among the professionals at the institution who support the student, but the student is encouraged to develop those strong relationships outside of the disability-service-office.

As a capstone of developing emotional maturity and self-identity, achieving interdependence is vital (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This level of interdependence can help students with disabilities understand when to ask for help and when to rely on oneself. Program development is a way to assist students within this population achieve a level of interdependence. While it is not beneficial to encourage dependence on others, it is also not beneficial to encourage complete independence. Interdependence can be achieved through a well-balanced blend of both approaches to service delivery. Keeping this in mind while developing program policies and procedures can help disability-service directors achieve a healthy balance.

## Resource allocation

As institutions of higher education begin tracking the retention of students with more focus on graduation, it is imperative to begin tracking the retention of college students with disabilities as well. The majority of disability-service providers operate under the premise that the Americans with Disabilities Act-Amendments Act is not a success-based law, but an access-based law. Unlike the disability related law in the K-12 system of education, the focus in higher education is not to make sure all students are successful. In contrast, the purpose of the disability service offices in a college setting is to make sure that students with disabilities have the same chance at success as any other student. It is their responsibility to ensure equal access not necessarily to ensure the success of students with disabilities. However, many other minority groups on college campuses are studied for their retention rates and programs are developed to help improve that retention rate.

By placing the focus on improving retention and graduation rates, the natural focus of resource allocation would be to place funding in the major need areas. Because the retention of this group of students has not been studied as extensively, resources may not be allocated as effectively to support the improvement. If disability-service offices begin studying and reporting the retention rate of this population of students, resource allocation in the form of human resource and financial resource assigned to disability services may improve. With added support, college students with disabilities could have a better opportunity for academic success in higher education.



## Current tensions in the field

The field of disability in higher education has many nuances and ambiguity in operation. Many decisions about departmental procedures and students support are based solely on the philosophy of the disability-service provider. There is little guidance for professional preparation, decision making, departmental make-up, or guiding principles for the work conducted to protect the civil rights of students. This ambiguity has caused increasing tension within the field. This disagreement regarding the nature of the work could have implications on the retention of college students with disabilities.

Due to the continuous changing of the legal landscape of disability in higher education, tensions remain consistent among professionals in the field. While disability-service providers have leadership through the Association for Higher Education and Disability, the organization truly offers only guidance. The difficulty in developing a consistent approach across the field was recently discussed by Boone, Borst, and Hermann (2013) in their symposium presentation at the national AHEAD conference. This presentation opened conversations among professionals about whether standards for the field should be explicit or vague. The current language in the ADAAA (2008) is vague and allows for professional interpretation at every level of service provision. This language allows professionals to conduct the work according to the philosophy of the disability-service director. While this supports the true individuality of people with disabilities and independent nature of the impact of disabilities, there is concern for what college students are being prepared for in the future. College students currently can access accommodations at institutions of higher education with somewhat limited requirements for documentation. The documentation requirements are defined by each disability-service director, which again, is based on his or her personal philosophy. The difficulty exists when the students

graduate from college. At this same national conference, Loring Brinkerhoff from Educational Testing Services (Brown, Wolf & Brinkerhoff, 2013) presented about the difficulties that are emerging from the recent AHEAD guiding principles for documentation (2012). While the process for accessing accommodations in higher education is simplified with these updated documentation principles, students are facing many more difficulties when requesting accommodations for entrance exams for graduate school and certification exams. By simplifying the process for requesting accommodations, professionals are decreasing the likelihood that those same accommodations will be offered for future endeavors.

This example of documentation requirements is only one example of the vague nature of the field. Whether professionals take on a case management approach or independence approach, whether universities employ one person to provide services or develop a strong set of professionals, whether department providers view the requirements of the ADA (2008) as a ceiling or baseline is completely the decision of the service providers. This inconsistency could potentially negatively affect how the work conducted in this field is viewed by faculty, administration, parents and students. Although the individual and interactive approach may be the most beneficial as students enter the college setting, is this lack of consistency within the field helping or hurting the retention and future employment of college students with disabilities?

Another area of tension within the field of disability in higher education is the decision of whether to cull out students with disabilities in retention studies at the university level. As indicated previously through this study, professionals in this field support both sides of the argument. Some leaders in the field remind others consistently that the purpose of the work done in this field is to provide equal access for students with disabilities not success. Other leaders argue that although it is not indicated in the legal guidance that professionals in the field offer

more support for students with disabilities so they might have a better chance at success, it is the right thing to do. Students with disabilities are already included when groups such as first time college students, Hispanic students, female students and African-American students are studied so many professionals resist identifying them further by disability alone. It is the professional mantra in the field that people with disabilities are viewed as people first and not identified by their disabilities. Conversely, professionals advocate daily for equal treatment, so if the retention rate of other minority student groups is being studied based on the identifying factor that makes them a part of that group, it could be viewed as equal to do the same thing for the group of students that have disabilities. This area of disagreement has made it very difficult for researchers to investigate the best practices for retaining college students with disabilities.

A final point to consider that is having an effect on the field of disability in higher education is the focus of the current research. As a result of the differing views about the study of retention of college students with disabilities, little professional research has been conducted. Through the process of the research for this study, many disagreements erupted between this researcher and other professionals in the field that are viewed as leaders in the field. This was a difficult position to be in professionally and that may be impacting the research conducted in the field.

Many of the current topics of research in the field are centered on minute details of the work in the field. The focus is not on the provision of accommodations, the development of models or the overall support of students anymore. Full studies are conducted regarding service animals vs. therapy animals, the use of miniature horses as service animals or how certain disabilities affect students. As an example, the most recent edition of *The Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* (AHEAD, 2013) was recently released. This is the

professional peer reviewed journal for the field of disability in higher education. In this edition, there are four studies and two practice briefs presented. These articles focus on transition work, faculty mentorship, and the perceptions among students with specific disabilities. These studies are valuable and can have great benefit, but projects that look at the overall experiences of college students with disabilities could have greater benefit. Studies are available that examine experiences of students but they tend to focus on specific disability types, or specific accommodations/services.

Research is not the main focus of many disability-service providers. The work load for these practitioners is often too expansive to allow for time to research and write for publication. To adequately carry out studies that have a professional effect, one would need to contribute a great deal of time and energy to the topic. This is often not a possibility for service-providers. While the focus for many faculty in higher education is to research and publish, the focus for disability-service providers is to maintain decided attention on the legal landscape and work daily with students as individuals. Expanding the scope of research in the field is a difficult endeavor, but could have a positive effect on the field in general.

#### Recommendations for future research

This study provides an introduction to the necessary data surrounding the retention of college students with disabilities. One area that became glaringly clear is the lack of information about the retention rates of this population of college students. While the retention rates of many minority groups of college students are frequently studied, the retention rates of students with disabilities at the universities in this study were unknown. Based on the movement in legislation to focus more on outcomes than enrollment, it was surprising to find that many disability service

providers still do not see the benefit of studying the retention of college students with disabilities as a separate subgroup. Even more surprising was the disagreement among disability professionals regarding the purpose of studying the retention of the student with whom they work every day. Although the purpose of the work of this group of professionals is to provide equal access rather than success, the focus in legislation is shifting, so too should the way they do their work.

It is the primary recommendation for future research, that this area be studied more extensively. This can be a quantitatively-based study that mirrors the studies already done on other minority populations. By knowing the baseline of the retention rates of college students with disabilities, researchers can more adequately study the factors that improve those rates.

Additionally, the sample size of this study was relatively small. Developing a quantitatively-based survey that asks similar questions can be more widely distributed among college students with disabilities. Expanding the sample size could allow for more generalized and accurate information from which to draw conclusions. In a larger study, the directors of the programs would not identify participants, so participation could be more anonymous, thus improving the reliability of the information gained.

Based on research and professional conversations, students with disabilities have typically chosen more urban college campuses to attend based on the need for accessibility. The infrastructure of cities tends to be more accessible in terms of transportation, physical access, communication access, and resource availability. The location of a college has historically been an important component in the college choice for students with disabilities. It was a pleasant surprise to discover that this has shifted and students with disabilities are choosing the college to attend based on their interests and majors instead of choosing based on the necessity of access.

The legal landscape has made it a requirement that all universities create the most physically and programmatically accessible campus possible. Although the resources are still available much more easily in an urban environment, the rural college campuses are doing what is necessary to make their environments accessible.

Creating a study that examines the college choices of students with disabilities would be advantageous to the field of higher education and retention. All universities are altering the focus to be more outcomes-based and students with disabilities are included in that requirement. The literature tells us that students commit more fully when they feel a sense of belonging within their college campus. If students with disabilities choose a college based on their interest level instead of resource availability, they may commit more fully and stay in college through graduation.

Finally, a question emerged from this study that resonates deeply with the researcher. Throughout professional preparation to work with people with disabilities, the message was always conveyed that helping people to develop into the most independent person possible should be the primary goal, however, through this study it was surprising when two very distinct forms of service provision emerged among the schools visited. One in which the directors act as case managers and meet the many needs of students with disabilities as they arise, and one in which the directors encourage independence by coaching students through finding the answers on their own. Both approaches had their own merits and downfalls, but it was not entirely clear whether one approach was better for the retention of students with disabilities than the other.

Interestingly, during the interviews with the disability service providers, the ethical implications of each approach came into question. The students receiving support through the offices that took the case management approach discussed a feeling of emotional support and

students knew that someone could take care of things if they needed help. This approach was very supportive of students with disabilities, but ethically is this model creating more dependence than independence? The students that received services through the departments that fostered more independence discussed knowing that the staff were available if they needed assistance, but approached accommodations and advocacy from the self first other than depending on others. This approach helped students develop strong self-advocacy skills but ethically, are the students with disabilities who already have a more difficult time getting the level of support they need or are they struggling unnecessarily? Based on experience, the literature, and data from this study, a potential blend of both approaches may be the appropriate way for disability service professionals to do their work while also helping students develop into strong self-advocates. Developing a study that examines the impact of each approach would be beneficial in not only studying the retention of the students within each approach but also could impact the development of programs and resource allocation in the future.

## Conclusion

This study has addressed a number of questions about the retention of college students with disabilities. While some questions have been answered, many more have arisen. The need for studying this population of students more thoroughly has become evident. As the field of research regarding the retention of college students increases, so too, must the study of the retention rates of college students with disabilities. Further understanding may encourage differing program development and resource allocations among institutions of higher education. Answering questions regarding the baseline-retention rate of this population will give service

providers a place to start in developing supports to improve or maintain these retention rates.

College students with disabilities have a lot to say, researchers just need to know what to ask.



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APPENDIX A  
IRB APPROVAL

## APPENDIX A



Institutional Review Board  
Dept. 4905  
615 McCallie Avenue  
Chattanooga, TN 37403-2598  
Phone: (423) 425-4443

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Michelle Rigler  
Dr. Jim Tucker  
IRB # 10-005

FROM: Lindsay Pardue, Director of Research Integrity  
M. D. Roblyer, IRB Committee Chair

DATE: January 21, 2010

SUBJECT: IRB # 10-005: The retention of college students with disabilities: What makes them stay?

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed and approved your application and assigned you the IRB number listed above. You must include the following approval statement on research materials seen by participants and used in research reports:

***The Institutional Review Board of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (FWA00004149) has approved this research project # 10-005.***

Please remember that you must complete Form C when the project is completed or provide an annual report if the project takes over one year to complete. The IRB Committee will make every effort to remind you prior to your anniversary date; however, it is your responsibility to ensure that this additional step is satisfied.

Please remember to contact the IRB Committee immediately and submit a new project proposal for review if significant changes occur in your research design or in any instruments used in conducting the study. You should also contact the IRB Committee immediately if you encounter any adverse effects during your project that pose a risk to your subjects.

For any additional information, please consult our web page <http://www.utc.edu/irb> or email [instrb@utc.edu](mailto:instrb@utc.edu)

Best wishes for a successful research project.

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Retention of college students with disabilities: What makes them stay?

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

#### Purpose of the research study:

A recent demographic study produced the results verifying that students with documented disabilities are retained at a higher rate than students without documented disabilities. This study is to build on that information and establish the main reasons why those students continue in college.

#### What you will be asked to do in the study:

You will be asked to complete a personal interview with the primary investigator of this project. This interview will involve questions about your experiences in college and your support systems. The interview will be tape recorded and transcribed at a later date.

#### Time required:

1-3 hours

#### Risks and Benefits:

You may be asked some questions about your social support systems that make you feel uncomfortable. That is the only inherent risk in this study.

#### Confidentiality:

Your identity and participation in this study will be kept confidential. Your information will be assigned a code number which will be connected to a transcript. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a locked file in my office. When the project is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Your name and any identifying information that could link you to the study will be excluded from the report.

#### Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

#### Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

#### Audio Recording of Study Activities

Interviews may be recording using audio recording to assist with the accuracy of your responses.

You have the right to refuse the audio recording. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording:            Yes \_\_\_\_\_            No \_\_\_\_\_

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

If you have questions about this study, please contact Michelle Rigler at (423) 425-4008, or Dr. Jim Tucker at (423) 425-5445.

Agreement:

I have read the information above and I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure. I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Committee, Institutional Review Board, at 423-425-5567. Additional contact information is available at [www.utc.edu/irb](http://www.utc.edu/irb)



APPENDIX C

CAMPUS DEMOGRAPHICS

APPENDIX C  
CAMPUS DEMOGRAPHICS

**Name of Institution:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location of Institution:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Total Student Enrollment:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age of students**

Average age of undergraduate students \_\_\_\_\_

Average age of graduate students \_\_\_\_\_

Average age of total student population \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnic make-up of students (in percentages)**

Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_ African American \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_ Asian \_\_\_\_\_

Native American \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Retention rates**

Total population \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D  
DISABILITY SERVICE OFFICE INFORMATION

## APPENDIX D

### DISABILITY SERVICE OFFICE INFORMATION

**Name of Office:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Number of students with disabilities registered:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Retention rate for students with disabilities:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Most used accommodations:**

\_\_\_\_\_Extended testing time                      \_\_\_\_\_Alternate furniture in classrooms

\_\_\_\_\_Testing in distraction reduced area                      \_\_\_\_\_Sign language interpreters

\_\_\_\_\_Alternate formatting of textbooks                      \_\_\_\_\_real time captioning

\_\_\_\_\_Priority registration                      \_\_\_\_\_Class note taker

**Additional services provided by your office:**

\_\_\_\_\_Advising                      \_\_\_\_\_Social skills development

\_\_\_\_\_Academic coaching                      \_\_\_\_\_Peer tutoring

\_\_\_\_\_Tutoring                      \_\_\_\_\_Work skill development

\_\_\_\_\_Student Associations                      \_\_\_\_\_Other

Please describe any other activities or services provided by your office:

APPENDIX E  
DIRECTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

APPENDIX E

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What philosophy of disability service do you employ as the Director of the program?
2. What does the organizational chart for your program look like?
3. Do you employ a specialist or generalist focus in managing the program?
4. What programs make you the most proud?
5. What part of your program needs further development?
6. What accommodations are most used by your students?
7. How is your program different than other disability programs?

APPENDIX F

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## APPENDIX F

### STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Assigned student number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:**

\_\_\_\_\_Male    \_\_\_\_\_Female

**Date of Birth:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Ethnicity:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic                      \_\_\_\_\_ American Indian/Alaskan Native

\_\_\_\_\_ White/Non-Hispanic    \_\_\_\_\_ Black/Non-Hispanic

\_\_\_\_\_ Asian-Pacific Islander    \_\_\_\_\_ Other

**Primary Area of Disability:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Learning Disability                      \_\_\_\_\_ Physical Disability

\_\_\_\_\_ ADD/HD                      \_\_\_\_\_ Hearing Impairment

\_\_\_\_\_ Vision Impairment                      \_\_\_\_\_ Psychological Disability

\_\_\_\_\_ Chronic Health Impairment

**Class status:**

\_\_\_\_\_ Freshman                      \_\_\_\_\_ Sophomore                      \_\_\_\_\_ Junior                      \_\_\_\_\_ Senior

\_\_\_\_\_ Graduate Student



- 1) What is your initial opinion about why students with disabilities stay in college?
- 2) What experiences do you think are different for you as a college student with a disability?
- 3) Do you feel like you “belong” at your university? Explain why or why not.
- 4) Who has been your main support system since coming to college? Economic support?  
Emotional support?
- 5) How have you been involved with your college social system?
- 6) What supports outside of the disabilities office have you used recently?
- 7) How did you find out that those services are available to students?
- 8) What has been the most helpful part about being registered with the Office for Students with Disabilities?
- 9) Which services do you find most useful through the Office for Students with Disabilities?
- 10) How have you experienced being treated fairly on your college campus? Unfairly?
- 11) If you had to choose one thing that has made you stay in college, what would it be?

## VITA

Michelle Rigler was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan as an only child to Brenda and Gary Taylor. She currently lives in Chattanooga, TN with her husband and three children. Michelle earned her Bachelor of Science Degree in Special Education-Severe Affective needs in 1998 from Western Michigan University. While working full time as a special education teacher, Michelle earned her Master of Arts Degree from Prescott College in Special Education-Severe Affective Needs. After working for several years in the field of special education, Michelle decided to make a career shift. She and her family moved from Colorado to Chattanooga, Tennessee and she began her career in higher education in 2004. Following the acceptance of this dissertation, Michelle received a Doctorate in Education from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in Learning and Leadership with a focus on Higher Education Administration.

Michelle's career in higher education has focused on creating equal access for students, faculty, staff, and visitors with disabilities. By remaining fluent in the language of the Americans with Disabilities Act-Amendments Act through all of its changes, Michelle has been able to create and manage an effective Disability Resource Center at The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She has been a professional member of several organizations and served in many leadership roles within these organizations. In addition, Michelle has presented at several local, regional, national and international conferences regarding the varying aspects of accommodations and programming for people with disabilities.